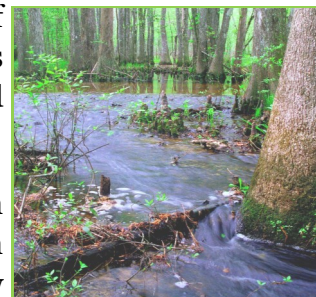


## History Along the Neches A Selection by Thad Sitton

¶The Neches runs through a lot of human history and uncovers bits and pieces of it from time to time. During the 1960s, a fisherman found a Clovis projectile point—a Paleo-Indian dart point approximately 11,000 years old—lying in a sandy trail at Holly Bluff campground. Holly Bluff is a popular river-side camping place about halfway between Highway 94 and Highway 59. There is no reason to think that this Clovis point accidentally fell out of the pocket of a passing archaeologist. These large fluted points are thinly scattered all across North America. The hunter-gatherers who made and used them specialized in very big game—mammoth, mastodon, the great ground sloth, and other creatures of the late Pleistocene—and the hunter may have lost his dart after one of them. Once upon a time, there may have been an almost African fecundity of game along the Neches, where now wander only the feral hog and white-tailed deer.



¶There is river time and human time, and while river time is slower it moves lightning fast as geologic processes go. The Neches changes its course even in the brief span of a human lifetime. Over a few thousand years the river snakes back and forth from bluff to bluff within its valley, departing and returning any number of times at a place like Holly Bluff. And only on the river's last visit did the Clovis point finally weather out of deep alluvium. I always think, what will show up next? The Neches keeps on digging, digging, digging—moving around in its valley and uncovering things.



¶Clovis points are nice, but I always keep my eye out for Spanish gold emerging from a cut bank at a bend of the river, or perhaps an unopened railroad safe on the bottom left behind from the outlaw days of Bonnie and Clyde. You make better canoeing time at high water, but it's when the river is very low that the cut banks and bottom get very interesting from a historical point of view. Legends of gold persist, especially for the Neches around Rockland, and old timers did tell me of an old safe periodically exposed during very low water at the abandoned Texas-Southeastern Railroad trestle. Debris from a payroll robbery gone wrong, or so they say. I'd like to be the first to find these things and turn them in (perhaps) to the US Forest Service or to some other proper governmental authority. Especially the gold.

¶Many interesting historical objects do emerge into view from the Neches in extremely low water. These include the timbers of dead steamboats, “sinker” logs that failed to make it to Beaumont during the 19<sup>th</sup> century log drives, the foundation timbers of ruined log tram bridges, and who knows what else. If you know where to look, you may see a V-shaped riffle that marks the site of one of the cross-river fish traps that outlaw fishermen used to harvest the river. I've never seen an abandoned dugout canoe at low water, but I don't doubt that there is one to be seen somewhere. Two of the old river men I interviewed around 1990 recalled true dugouts—hollowed-out-log boats—in use on the Neches as late as the 1930s.

¶Native Americans, Atakapan-speaking tribal groups and the Caddo, resided along the Neches when the Spanish arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but they lived lightly on the land and had little impact on the river valley. Only their stone tools and pottery shards remain. On the narrow upper river, fallen trees were used as foot bridges, often with ropes made of black walnut bark stretched across over the logs as hand lines. Sometimes a slow-burning fire might be kept going for days at a tree's base to cause it to fall in just the right place. On the lower river, too wide for spanning with a single tree, early Anglo settlers noticed how Indian trails often crossed the river where big patches of switch cane grew at its edge. An Indian—or a settler—could construct a make-shift paddle float for river transit from the buoyant cane in only a few minutes.

¶Settlers just arrived by ox cart or ox wagon from Mississippi or Alabama might put in their first survival crop of corn at a big switch cane patch. All you had to do was cut the cane, leave it a while to dry, burn it off, then punch holes in the ground with a stick in the ashes and plant your corn. You might locate your permanent corn and cotton fields on the higher ground just outside the river valley to avoid floods, but the thick cane brake offered an instant corn field in the first year. Game was amazingly abundant at the time of first arrival, but settlers always thought they had to have corn for human food and “fuel” for work stock.

¶Neches valley pioneers were particular about their cornbread. Until the day he died, pioneer stockman Valentine “Beartine” Withers of the Yellow Bluff area insisted that a succession of wives serve him three corn pones fried in bear fat with every meal—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—each pone with three distinct fingermarks on it. Beartine himself provided the cooking oil, since every trip into the big woods with his dogs to check his stock was also an incipient bear hunt.

¶Anglo-American history along the Neches divides readily into two distinct parts—the river-focused era and the timber-company era, with the dividing line sometime around 1880. Both of these eras left their marks along the river, often at the river bluffs. Fresh from travel on the awful, mud-plagued “traces” (no one called them roads) stretching back to the east, settlers located their lands along the Neches valley where they would at least have a fighting chance to get their cotton and other frontier products downriver to market. Bluffs bordering the river were at a premium, and first-comers often chose them to settle on. A plantation's house and fields might be just outside the flood-prone river valley, but the high point along the Neches (and the land just below it) often soon included a characteristic infrastructure of boat landing, cotton shed, and perhaps a river ferry. As more time passed, a water- or animal-powered grist mill and cotton gin might be added, and even (in certain advantaged locations), a post office and small mercantile store. Shooks Bluff on the upper Neches had all these things and also included a resident doctor and one of those small steam-powered “peckerwood” sawmills that predated by several decades the giant industrial mills.

¶Steamboats occasionally called at Shooks Bluff, though only in high-water season. Enterprising men like Captain Andrew Smyth had run the Neches from the late 1820s.

At first flatboats took bales of cotton and other frontier products on a one-way trip to the coast, then double-ended keelboats, shaped like Noah's Ark, took up the task. Keelboats could haul and pole their way back upstream to their home ports, but the laborious journeys took weeks. Then came the steamboats, which on the Neches were a far cry from the big Mississippi versions. Andrew Smyth of the Bevilport area of Jasper County passed through all these river transport stages—flatboats, keelboats, and steamboats—and ended up as Captain Smyth of the famous steamboat *Laura*.

¶Canoeing the Neches, picking your way around log jams, it's not easy to imagine a steamboat coming at you around the next bend in the river, but in the old days it might



have. Neches steamers were small and specialized for shallow-water operation; although a good many still hit snags and ended up on the bottom. Both competent and lucky, Smyth ran his steamboat for years, picking up bales of cotton and other exports of field and forest at every boat landing on his way, as well as orders for the return trip upriver. Virtually every bit of high ground—"bluff bank"—that bordered the twisting Neches had a boat landing, and (as noted before) some of these places had cotton storage facilities, mercantile stores, and other developments. (So far as I know, none of this interesting array of things remains standing for the canoeist-historian to examine, but Zacharia Collier's store from Town Bluff, the so-called "Natchez on the Neches," has been moved to Heritage Village west of Woodville and is well worth a visit.)

¶When the first steamboats of the year reached communities far upriver in fall high water—Shooks Bluff on the Neches, Patton's Landing on its tributary the Angelina—they triggered celebrations known as "packet days." It was as if the starship *Enterprise* had just landed on a remote frontier planet. Locals brought out not only cotton bales to ship downriver but also deer skins, otter pelts, bear pelts, and bear oil put up in fancy gourd containers. Many a hand-rived cypress shingle also went downstream.

¶After the railroads and the big timber companies arrived during the 1870s and 1880s, riverside settlements often packed up and moved "inland," relocating along the new railroad. People at Shooks Bluff did this over a few years, migrating to the new town of Wells in Angelina County. Railroads brought an end to the use of the Neches for transport, but before the end came their business had been badly injured (you might even say, sunk), by two decades of log transport. The first big sawmills located at Beaumont in the decade before the Civil War, and they got their logs by river—free-floated logs and, as time went on, log rafts. Just what happened to river transport is summed up in a single old photograph, which shows Captain Andrew Smyth's steamboat *Laura* blocked by a jam of log rafts on the Neches, with various crewman walking glumly about on the logs. The phrase, end of an era, is written all over this scene. Then came the railroads and river transport vanished. To a considerable degree, mainstream economic history now turned its back on the Neches, leaving the wild bottoms to free-range stockmen, fishermen, and hunters.

¶Typically, as in the case of the Kirby Lumber Company and the Santa Fe Railroad, the big timber companies and the railroads came into the Neches country hand in hand.

As railroads built north through the virgin pine forests, sawmill towns sprang up on the main lines behind the construction, and—as those began to cut out—side lines built east and west into the remaining pine forests. Most early companies didn't focus on the hardwood forests of the Neches valley, but their tramlines crossed the river in many places to get to the uncut pines.

¶Everyone knows about the coming of cut-and-get-out lumbering to East Texas, but few fully appreciate the magnitude of the social change it brought. An animal-powered agricultural society of small, mostly-subsistence, farms and stock ranches—a place that was still half primitive Southern frontier –disappeared in a decade under a new steam-powered, heavy-industrial present. Backwoodsmen became industrial workers just like that. A lone fisherman on the Neches in 1907, at first listening only to the barred owl serenade, would have heard the wake-up whistles of several sawmill towns at first faint light of day. Anywhere on the river, that would have been true. Texas ranked third nationally in lumber production in 1907.

¶While this storm of change swept across the pine uplands, the Neches flowed on its way, and the yearly river floods helped to keep development out. For the most part, the companies did not want hardwoods, and the swampy bottoms presented problems to mechanized railroad logging. Southern Pine Lumber Company owned much of the lands along the upper Neches, and it took good care of its bottoms, selectively harvesting parts of them from time to time and building logging trams across the river at a few places. The Texas-Southeastern Railroad trestle crossing the river below Highway 94 was part of the SPLC's mainline from Diboll to an every advancing series of timber camps up the Neches valley. This defunct railroad bridge, and the abandoned bridge of the Texas and New Orleans Railroad near Rockland, are the two major logging-era structures seen today along the Neches.

¶The canoeist-historian is fortunate in one thing. Romantic industrial ruins from the logging era are very few, but the best example is easily reached from the Neches. The skeletal remains of Old Aldridge, once a rather typical sawmill and sawmill town, can be seen today in deep forest a few hundred yards from the river in Angelina National Forest, near Boykin Springs Campground.

¶“Living history” still persists along the Neches in one sense: the feral hogs. A canoeist can scarcely float a 15 of the river without seeing one or several of these icons free-range era. Such swine were variously called “woods hogs,” or “rooter hogs” by local people, and men I interviewed from 1988 to 1992 preferred the Until the 1950s, most of the commissioner's precincts along the Neches remained free



very literal  
-mile stretch  
of the former  
“razorbacks,”  
most of the  
latter term.

range, which is to say, they had no stock laws requiring hog men and cowmen to keep their stock behind fences. Which meant that landowners had no perimeter fences! Earmarked hogs and branded cows thus wandered everywhere across other people's land, and were periodically located with dogs, rounded up, and "worked" by their owners, who freely trespassed to do this.

¶Many customary use rights—rights by local tradition—accompanied the legal right to range livestock and to move freely about to take care of them. You could, among other things, hunt, fish, build temporary camps, gather firewood or pine knots or hickory nuts, rob bee trees, and even improve the free range by setting the woods on fire. Some people violated social mores of the "open woods" tradition to take landowners' animal pelts, railroad ties, and white oak stave trees.

¶You could also build fishing camps on other people's land. Some men did that for occasional weekend use, and others did it for good, dropping out of rural society to become permanent river hermits. The man Trinity County landowner Roy Smith knew only as



"Tomcat Red" did this not far from the Highway 94 bridge. Red came down one time to fish and never left. He "fished till he died," Smith told me. Thirty miles upriver, Old Man Scurlock did the same, soon giving his name to the slough and island he lived on, a place later renamed "Big Slough" by the US Forest Service. Scurlock scraped out a living selling fish from his live box to visitors and offering the services of his handsome stud horse. He needed little cash. At Stirtle Eddy, Bill Evan's Island, and Cat Eason's

Island, other river rats also held land by squatters' rights.

¶These were the rare exceptions among the Neches place names. As I wrote in *Backwoodsmen* (1995), "Locations in the hills were often named for people, but in the Neches bottoms, the names differed; they were woods names, river names, wilderness names; Buck Lake, Lone Pine Ridge, Gourd Vine Eddy, Bear Man's Bluff, Pigeon Creek, Black Water Slough. The Hasinai Caddo had used similar names."

¶Human history shadows the remote Neches valley, emerging from time to time as a fascinating surprise, like the long-lost Clovis point, but it does not overwhelm the canoeist, lost on the timelessness of the Neches, which suggests all the wilderness rivers human beings have ever drifted upon in boats. The free-flowing river itself is the greatest and most valuable historical entity, a link to the lost wilderness history of not only East Texas but the entire lowland South. It is a national resource. "The Neches River is scenic," Pete Gunter wrote, "and is rich with bird, fish, reptile and mammal life. Stretches of the river are so world-lost and remote that one can, while canoeing, actually believe that one has lost touch with cities and suburbs forever."