5-2020

Stories from the River

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STORIES FROM THE RIVER
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A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
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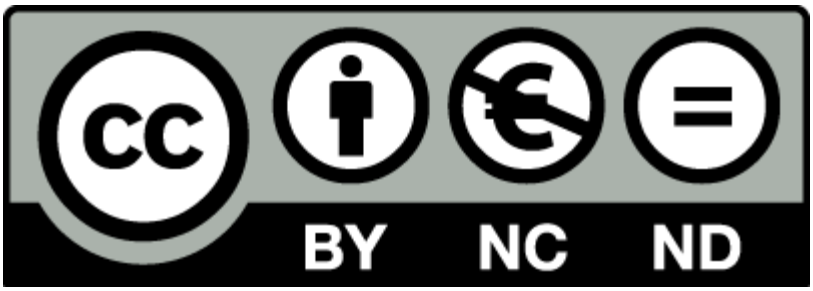

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Stories from the River

Aubrey Parke

Departmental Honors Senior Thesis

Trinity University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

April 29, 2020

Contents

Acknowledgements

First, I want to think each and every person who sat down to do an interview with me, giving a part of their valuable time to support my project. I also want to thank the archivists and librarians who work at the Institute of Texan Cultures, the San Antonio Public Library, and the Conservation Library. Their expertise was invaluable to me.

At Trinity University, so many staff and faculty members supported this work either directly or indirectly. Dr. Richard Reed and Dr. Norma Cantú are patient, wise advisors, as well as expert editors than manage to be both helpful and encouraging. Dr. Jennifer Mathews, chair of the Sociology and Anthropology Department, and Kate Schubert, the department administrator, made the Honors Thesis process possible for me. Dr. Alexandra Gallin-Parisi in the Coates Library helped me navigate copyright and intellectual property information. Classes with Dr. Angela Tarango, Dr. Tahir Naqvi, and Professor Jenny Browne planted the seeds for this project.

Of course, I want to thank my family and friends for their continual support. I also want to thank everyone who works day in and day out to care for the river, including but not limited to staff at the San Antonio River Authority and city employees who work to maintain the Riverwalk. Last but certainly not least, I sincerely thank everyone who takes time to read this piece of writing. It will always be a work in progress, but I am grateful for your attention.

Prologue: A Confession

For me, the San Antonio-born daughter of midwestern transplants, researching the river has been equal parts academic inquiry and personal quest. I have always wanted to know where I fit in the history of my city, to feel like I belong here. And everyone in San Antonio, whether from the inner city or the north-side suburbs, can locate themselves in relationship to the river.

Growing up in the suburbs, I accepted the river as a timeless fact. The river gave geographic meaning to the city, running through downtown like a central artery and drawing tourists to its lively pulse. My earliest memory of the San Antonio River is attending an award ceremony at the Arneson River Theater. We waved at passing riverboats because, as my grandparents instructed me, ours is a friendly city. After the ceremony, we walked towards Landry's seafood restaurant under the particular damp heat of a February sun. My grandfather bought me a paper flower crown with a long tail of curled ribbon. And from then on, I gave no thought to where the river began or ended, spatially or temporally. It simply was.

Then, some twelve years after that first encounter, I met Roberto. I was working for a cultural arts group, and he was attending one of our mural design meetings. Because we happened to sit next to each other, we chatted politely for a few minutes and Roberto handed me his card. The tagline said "Member, Native American Church." At the time, I was taking a class on Native American Religions and had just learned about peyote. Roberto, being the wonderful sort of person who is both passionate about his culture and generous with his time, agreed to meet with me. We sat crisscross on a cement outcropping near Blue Star Contemporary Art Gallery, looking down at the river. Behind us, people chattered and sipped lattes. Below us, others zipped down the hike-and-bike trails on bikes and skateboards. Roberto taught me the Coahuiltecan names for words like water bird, grass, river. He explained the significance of

water in peyote meetings and told me how alive and electric he felt near the water, knowing this was the home of his ancestors.

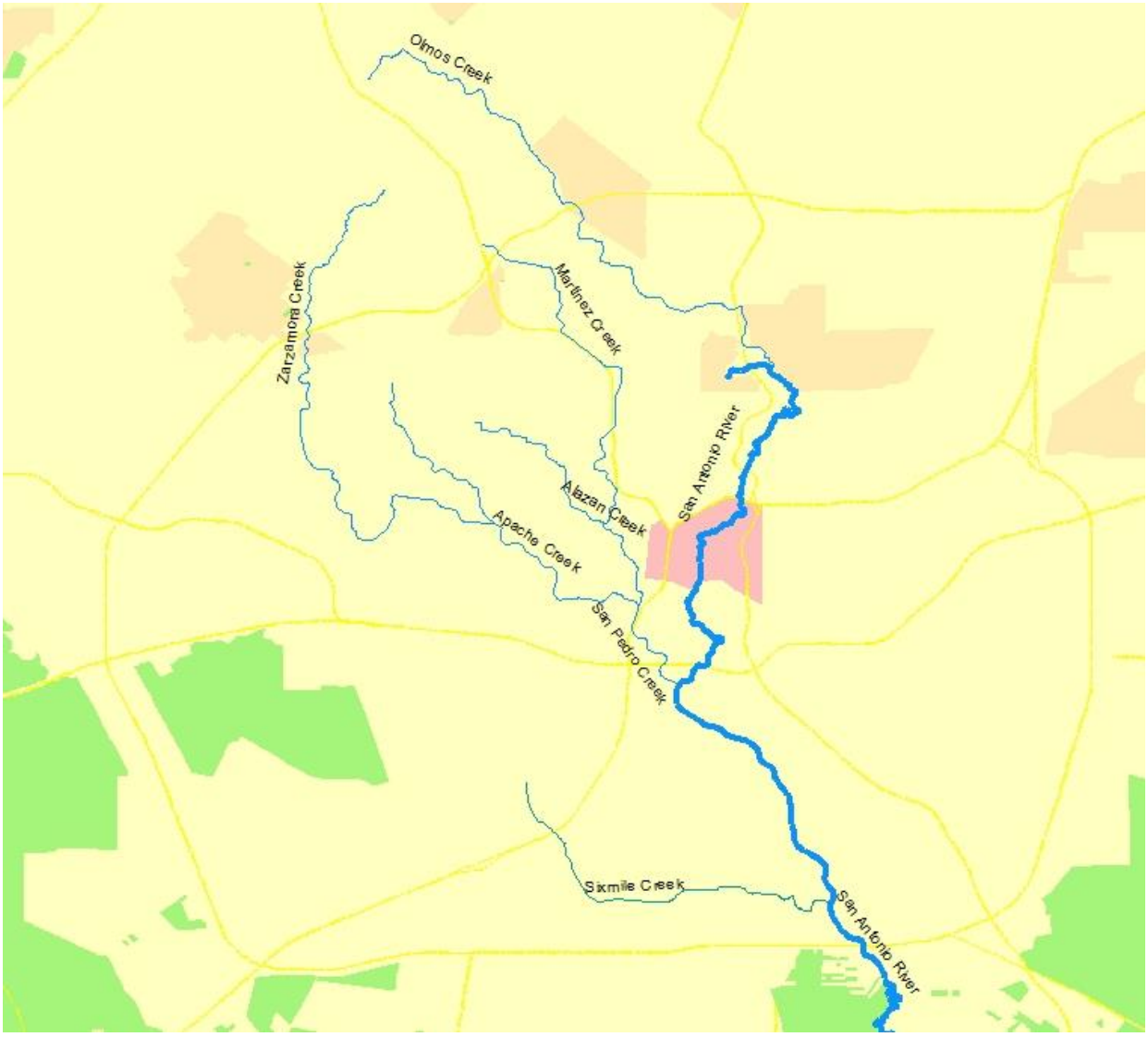
As Roberto spoke, I felt an ache in my chest. I recognized the sharp, semi-sweet throb; I had felt it before while traveling. I was homesick, except this time, I was homesick in my own city, missing a home I never had. I longed for the grass to be more than grass, the ground more than bedrock and soil, the river more than a body of water. Roberto inhabited a world of memories that were, for me, accessible only through second-hand stories, as close and as impossibly far as live satellite footage of Mars.

I began to write almost compulsively about the river, weaving it into assignments for poetry, religion, and anthropology classes. This project gave me the chance to dive into archives at the Institute of Texan Cultures, the San Antonio Public Library Texana collection, and the Conservation Society Library, as well as the UTSA Digital Collections. Most wonderfully, I got to conduct interviews with 27 different people (see Appendix), including community organizers, River Authority staff, and people who have lived along the river and its creeks for years, sometimes even generations. Their stories brought the river to life for me. I hope I can do the same for you.

Maps

All maps made in ArcGIS by the author using publicly available data from the City of San Antonio and the USGS National Map.

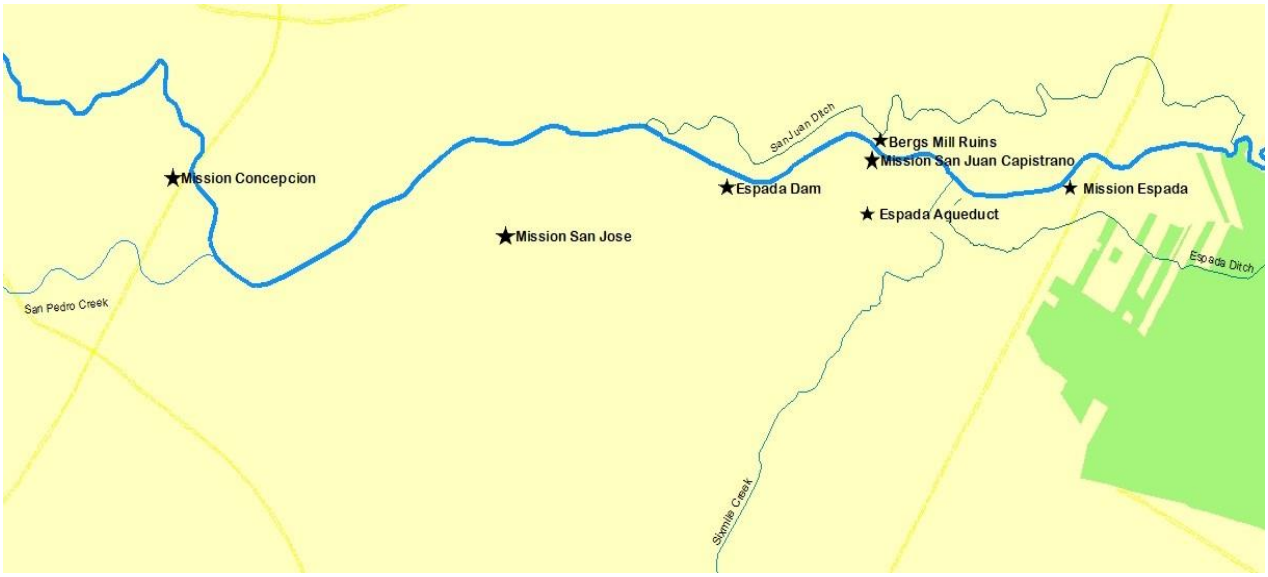
Map 1: The San Antonio River and (some of) its creeks



This map shows where Olmos Creek feeds into the San Antonio River, shortly after the river begins at the San Antonio Springs (present-day campus of University of the Incarnate Word). Zarzamora, Apache, Alazán, and Martinez Creeks feed into San Pedro Creek, which then flows into the San Antonio River south of downtown. Together, these five creeks are known as the West Side Creeks.

The yellow lines are part of San Antonio's highway system; the completed circle is Loop 410. Orange sections belong to incorporated cities, like Alamo Heights, Tobin Hill, and Olmos Park. Green sections fall outside of city limits.

Map 2: The San Antonio River south of downtown



This map, oriented E-W, shows each of the four southern missions, along with the Bergs Mill Ruins, the old Espada Dam, and Espada Aqueduct. Sixmile Creek flows into the San Antonio River, while the San Juan Ditch and Espada Ditch (also called *acequias*) flow out of the river. Just after Mission Espada, the River crosses Loop 410.

1 – The River

When the architect Frederick Law Olmstead first visited San Antonio in 1853, he described it as a river-bound jewel nestled in a broad, open wilderness:

> Seven miles from San Antonio we passed the Salado, another smaller creek, and shortly after, rising a hill, saw the domes and white clustered dwellings of San Antonio below us. We stopped and gazed long on the sunny scene. The city is closely-built and prominent, and lies basking on the edge of a vast plain, through which the river winds slowly off beyond where the eye can reach…There is little wood to be seen in this broad landscape. Along the course of the river a thin edging appears.[1]

Taking the same trek from New Braunfels to San Antonio today, Olmsted would find himself near Loop 410,[i] gazing at a sprawling web of overcrowded highways, shopping centers, and residential subdivisions. The river would be completely obscured, and downtown San Antonio marked only by the 750-foot-tall Tower of the Americas, barely visible over the tangle of elevated freeways that converge near the city center. And yet, none of the development that now conceals the river would have been possible without its nurturing waters.

Caught somewhere between the Mexico-U.S. border and the booming metropolises of Houston and Dall-as, San Antonio struggled for decades to shake off its reputation as "a big, sleepy country town, with a nice climate, a nice little river running through the town, quite unaware of what [is] going on in the world."[2] From the gushy travel guides published by the Chamber of Commerce in the early 20th century to the tax breaks designed to draw companies like Valero and Whataburger to San Antonio, business and civic leaders have fought to stay relevant on the national scene. And yet, much of the city's appeal comes from a sense of the past, a feeling of antiquity, of roots that run deep. People who wish to make San Antonio profitable

[i] Location approximated based on clues in Olmsted's writing: he was traveling from New Braunfels, crossed Cibolo Creek, crossed Salado Creek about seven miles away from the city, and was standing on elevated ground with a good view of downtown.

must consider how to project the image of a successful, hygienic city that is simultaneously historic, quaint, and full of character.

The river lies at the heart of the tension between San Antonio's complex past and contested future. It has been a place for living, swimming, farming, fishing, and washing clothes. It has also been a source of flooding and disease, an eyesore, and a trash-bin. It has been a colorful tourist hub and a tool of urban revitalization, as well as a weapon of race and income-based segregation and displacement. Since the catalyst of Spanish settlement, it has mostly been all of these things at once.

In its infancy, San Antonio nursed at the banks of the river. Spanish general Don Domingo Terán de los Ríos and Father Damian Massanet traveled north from Mexico City in 1691, seeking places to establish eight new Catholic missions.[3] The priest and general traveled together so that, in one fell swoop, they could convert the native peoples, make them subjects of the Spanish crown, and conscript them for labor in the missions. Following the course of the Medina River, the Spanish company reached a plane with a bubbling creek and clusters of billowing cedars, willows, cypresses, and oaks, the "most beautiful [country] in New Spain."[4] A large group of Payaya Indians camped near the present-day San Pedro Springs received the travelers warmly. Father Massanet and Terán de los Rios saw the ideal place to build a mission: hundreds of potential converts, fertile soil, and abundant water. And thus, people began not only to drink from the river, to catch her fish and gather the fruits she caused to swell with sweet juices, but to tap into her stream, to squeeze her waters into freshly gouged channels.[ii]

[ii] I have chosen to use feminine she/her pronouns for the river, even though the Spanish word for river (*el río*) is masculine. This choice is meant to reflect the river's status of life-giving mother and nurturer for people in South Texas, as well as to comment on a historical tendency to feminize natural features, discussed at length in the next chapter.

Antonio Menchaca's pen-drawn map of San Antonio in 1764 shows the *oja de agua*, a deep blue spring that feeds the San Antonio River, as a button of water surrounded by bristly ink-brushed trees. The river flows in a serrated but direct line from the *oja de agua* to the relocated Mission San Antonio de Valero, east of a pronounced oxbow bend in the river. The *acequia madre*, an irrigation ditch dug by indigenous laborers under Spanish coercion, cuts between Mission San Antonio and the *oja de agua*. This and other *acequias* irrigated farm and ranch lands around the settlement. West of the mission and the oxbow bend, small buildings arranged in a boxy grid nestle in the elbow crook formed by the convergence of the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek. This is the *presidio de Bexar*, the civic seed of what would become the City of San Antonio. Further south on the meandering river come four missions, each with its own *acequia:* Mission Concepción, with pronounced twin bell towers, Mission San José, set back from the river and thoroughly fenced in, the low-walled Mission San Juan, and the tranquil Mission Francisco de la Espada, just across the river from San Juan. After Mission Espada, the river goes on, meeting the Medina and presumably rambling onward to the Gulf of Mexico.

 [5]

Menchaca's map of San Antonio

The *acequias*, although innocuous and delicately drawn on Menchaca's map, mark the beginning of the end of the bountiful springs and river that first entranced Terán de los Rios and Father Massanet. As the humble *presidio de Bexar* continued to grow, shifting from an outpost

on the Spanish frontier to a growing capital city in the years following the French and Indian War,[6] people began to dig artesian wells to access groundwater. Population and groundwater use grew in tandem as Anglo settlers poured into the San Antonio area and Texas became a state. In 1873, the city began taking bids for a waterworks company that would systemize water distribution in San Antonio.[7] A French company won the bid but Colonel George Washington Brackenridge, a cotton trader and real estate tycoon, acquired that company in 1879.[8] By 1891, the Water Works Company was pumping water from the aquifer directly to stores and homes.[9] Although indoor piping and plumbing was slow to catch on in San Antonio, it did eventually become widespread, and Brackenridge fell into a deep depression when he saw the fruits of his labor.

Pumps and wells drew on the same aquifer that fed the San Antonio Springs or Blue Hole, labeled *oja de agua* on Menchaca's map. Along with San Pedro Springs and runoff from the Hill Country, the San Antonio Springs fed the river. Brackenridge loved the springs. He built his retirement villa on a piece of land overlooking the Blue Hole. When the new San Antonio Waterworks Company began to pump directly from the Edwards Aquifer groundwater supply, the springs vanished. Where water once shot out of the ground in crystal-blue streams, dead leaves floated and festered in a muddy hole. The Colonel wrote: "This river is my child and it is dying by the sinking of artesian wells and I cannot stay to see. I must go."[10]

He sold the headwaters land and even the villa he built near the Blue Hole Spring to the Sisters of Charity,[11] who had come to San Antonio to care for the sick during a cholera outbreak.[12] The sisters would later establish what is now the Headwaters Sanctuary at the University of the Incarnate Word, but the springs would never be the same. Today, they only flow after periods of intense rainfall. And yet, because the present-day San Antonio Water

System (SAWS) pipes and pumps groundwater, San Antonio has been able to spread north, away from the river, becoming one of the largest cities in the United States.

The river has shaped the very bones of the city. Anyone who has lived in San Antonio for any amount of time knows the streets are infamously confusing, splitting into five-way intersections, changing names at inauspicious times, and taking sudden sharp curves that carry you in the opposite direction of where you meant to go. Originally, the Spaniards built streets to align with the confluence of the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek, and to connect the missions and the *presidio de Bexar* with their *acequias.*[13] Roads extended along the river and the *acequias*, twisting and turning with the water's meandering flow.[14] Because the river coiled so tightly, the Spaniards could not lay out San Antonio according to their traditional grid system. The river would have cut perfectly straight roads into dozens of pieces, demanding more bridges than the public could build or maintain.[15] To this day, San Antonio roads are bound to the river.

Time has passed and we sink our hands deeper into the ground, siezing the water we need to keep spreading across the good land that surrounds us. We have both flooded the river and drunk her dry, depending on the exigencies of the historical moment. We have forced brown people to move south and west along the river, pushing them out of ancestral homes, and they have kept on living, just like the river does. No matter what, she keeps living.

Today, she looks nothing like she did three hundred and fifty years ago, when she was an older sister to the Coahuiltecans and not yet a mother to several greedy generations of pioneers profiteers, and wanderers. Because of all our pumping and digging and cement-laying, only four small pieces of her original channel remain, slender and half-hidden under the greenery near River Road, Mission San Jose, old Espada Dam, and Mission San Juan. Those sections seem like afterthoughts, shallow loops that feed into the primary channel.

Mostly, the river is straighter than before, but not rigid; wider in some places, but not at all swollen; shallower, but not spread thin. She has aged with grace, enduring pollution, excavation, extortion, and neglect. These stories are hers, and ours.

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[1] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A journey through Texas* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1978), 148.

[2] Charles Kilpatrick, interviewed by Sterling Holmesly, May 6, 1994, transcript, UTSA Libraries Special Collections Digital Collections, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4.

[3] "Instructions Given by the Superior Government to Be Observed in the Expedition to the Province of Texas, January 23, 1691," in The Expedition of Don Domingo Teran de los Rios into Texas, ed. Paul J. Folk (Texas Catholic Historical Society, 1932), 4.

[4] Domingo de Teran, "Itinerary and Daily Account Kept by General Domingo de Teran, Begun May 16, 1691, Finished April 15, 1692," in The Expedition of Don Domingo Teran de los Rios into Texas, ed. Paul J. Folk (Texas Catholic Historical Society, 1932), 14-15.

[5] Luis Antonio Menchaca, *Mapa del Presidio de San Antonio de Bezar,y sus Misiones de la provincia de Texas*, March 1764, manuscript, 36.7 x 46.7 cm., John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI, accessed February 14, 2020, https://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCBMAPS~1~1~1071~101670002:Mapa-d-e-l-Presidio-d-e--San-Antoni.

[6] Lewis Fisher, *The Spanish Missions of San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 1998), 12-13.

[7] Charles Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 99-113.

[8] Thomas E. Ewing, "Waters Sweet and Sulphurous: The First Artesian Wells in San Antonio," Society of Independent Earth Scientists (SIPES) Newsletter, November 2001, 39(3), 4.

[9] Porter, 114-115.

[10] Porter, 123.

[11] Ibid.

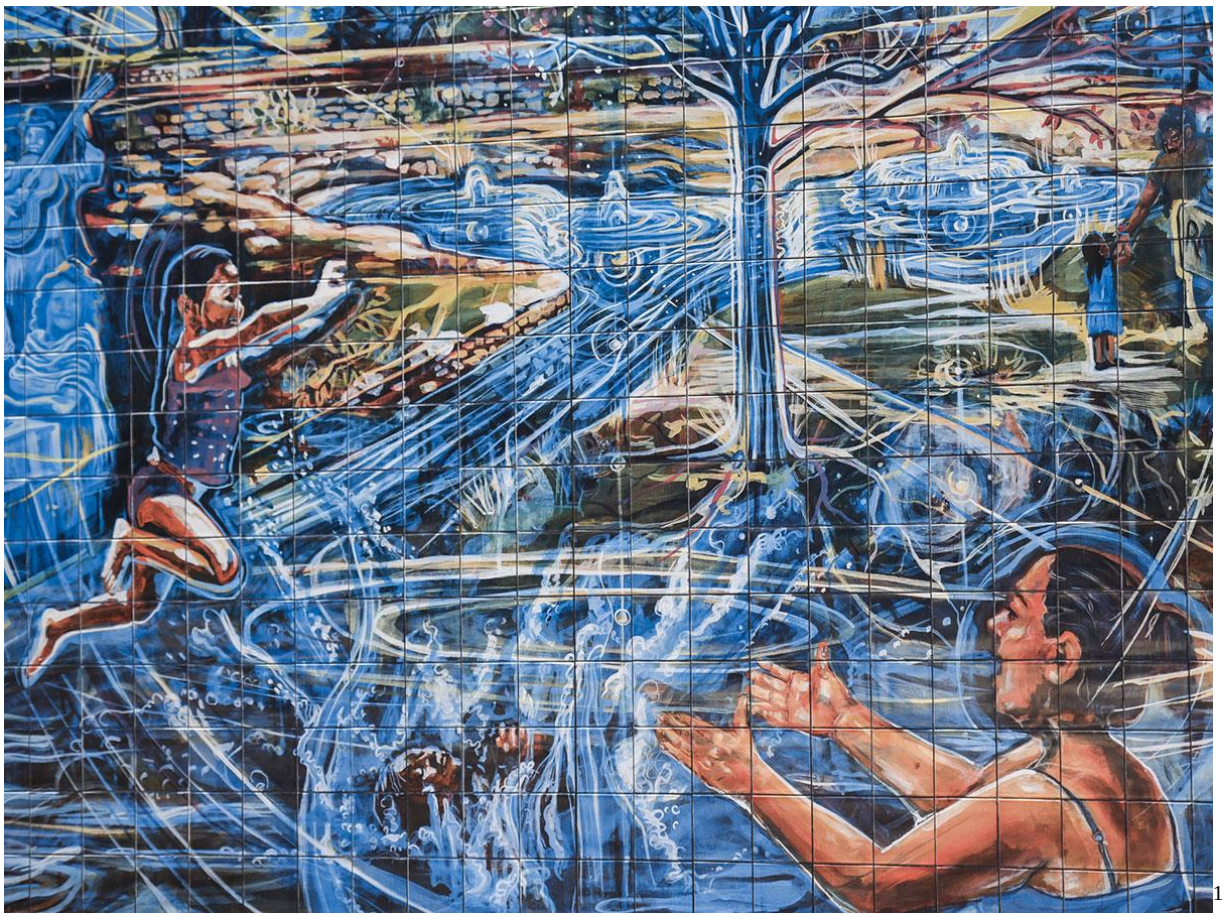
[12] Sister Cindy Stacy, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, October 23, 2019.

[13] Steven Land Tillotson, "Urban Form and Cultural Landscape," in *San Antonio Architecture: Traditions and Visions*, ed. Julius M. Gribou, Robert G. Hanley, and Thomas E. Robey (American Institute of Architects San Antonio, 2007), 119-120.

[14] David Moore, Martha Freeman, and Tara Dudley, *The Meridian Highway in Texas* (Austin: Texas Historical Commission), 2016, 199-203.

[15] Lewis Fisher, *American Venice* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 2015), 6.

2 - Delight

 [1]

Detail from "De todos caminos, somos todos uno" by Adriana Garcia

Separately, in 1853 and 1859, two white men stumbled into fairyland and sent accounts home to the Northeast. Standing next to a deep, round well of turquoise-blue water that burst out of the ground in twelve-foot streams, they claimed to have entered another world.

“The San Antonio Spring boils in a vast volume from a rocky basin,” wrote the journalist Richard Everett, “which, environed by mossy stones and overlapping foliage, seems devised for the especial dwelling-place of nymphs and naiads.”[2]

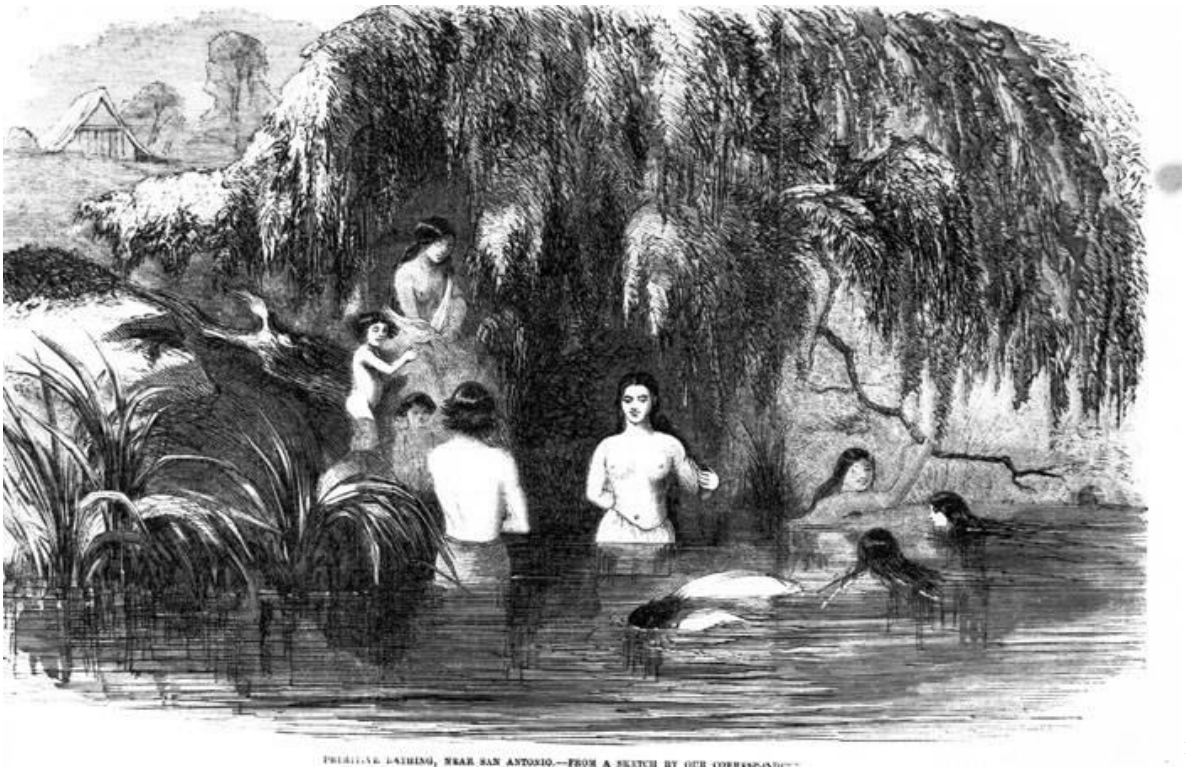
Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect who designed Central Park in New York City, embellished Everett’s fantastical sentiment:

> The San Antonio Spring may be classed as one of the first water among the gems of the natural world. The whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst. It has all the beautiful accompaniments of a smaller spring, moss, pebbles, seclusion, sparkling sunbeams, and dense overhanging luxuriant foliage. The effect is overpowering. It is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring. You cannot believe your eyes, and almost shrink from sudden metamorphosis by invaded nymphdom.[3]

But Everett and Olmsted did not stop at the headwaters of the San Antonio River. They traced its course through the sleepy urban mosaic of Anglo neighborhoods built in brick and wood, German homes of creamy white limestone, and row upon row of Mexican adobe houses, all the way to the outskirts of the city where *acequias* still irrigated small plots of farmland. Behind, before, and between the houses ran the San Antonio River, looping and bending and doubling over itself so that three miles of land held fourteen miles of tangled river.[4] The river was crystal clear, rapid and foaming when its channel narrowed, smooth and sun-dappled when the banks spread wide between rows of pecan trees. Standing by a bridge on the east bank of the river where the channel crosses Commerce Street, Olmsted watched the river flow "rapidly but noiselessly over pebbles and between reedy banks."[5] Mesmerized, he wished for hours to spend leaning over the bridge-rail, gazing at the sparkling waters.

While contemplating the river, Everett and Olmsted both lingered on descriptions of voluptuous copper-skinned women. Evidently these beautiful San Antonians walked in and around their homes in nothing but thin chemises, which they readily shed to bathe in the sparkling river. "Their plump women, especially, are excellent swimmers," writes Olmsted, "and fond of displaying their luxurious buoyancy."[6] According to Everett, "parties of men, women, and children bathe in the San Antonio River, just outside the corporate limits, without the annoyance of dress."[7] The women, he wrote, pay "not the slightest regard for the curious glances of passers-by."[8] Anglo visitors attributed to Mexicans in San Antonio the mournful regality of Montezuma, the romance and gravitas of Spain, and the supposed naivety of "the indians." They

assessed the men as excellent workers, who rivaled black slaves for cheap and productive labor,[9] and the women, with "glossy" and "luxuriant" hair and "deep, dark, liquid"[10] eyes, as amenable to "flattering attentions and rich presents."[11] These descriptions suggest a view of Mexicans as good-natured but weak in mind and will, better off subservient to whites.



[12]

Primitive Bathing Near San Antonio, *an engraving reproduced in Richard Everett's article*

Northern visitors like Everett and Olmsted viewed San Antonio and its people as part of a virginal paradise, fertile and ripe for the picking. They town was ancient, charming, and lush, but also isolated and wild, in need of redemption. Drawing on the language of Manifest Destiny, Harpers Weekly writer Harriet Prescott Spofford described San Antonio as a gateway to the Promised Land. She enumerated its likenesses to Biblical descriptions of Palestine: abundant water, shepherds and flocks, cattle on a thousand hills, wheat fields, fragrant vineyards, and softly cooing turtledoves. Even the steamy climate recalled Genesis. "One feels what the burden of the day means," Prescott Spofford wrote, "and recalls the Lord walking in His garden at

evening." Perhaps in San Antonio, she speculates, the nation will find "a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness."[13] If South Texas was the Promised Land, white settlers were the chosen people, called to infuse life into a backwater province.

Anglo accounts associated brown people in San Antonio, both indigenous and Mexican, with the land itself. Spanish colonists had sought to civilize Coahuiltecans, who lived as hunter-gatherers, by bringing them indoors into the missions. Until Spanish intervention, the Coahuiltecans lived on pecans, berries, and fish, [14] staying close to lifegiving bodies of water.[15] Their daily dependence on the fruits of the earth made them closer to the land than the civilized Spaniards, who mastered the earth by farming and living on top of it in manmade houses. Spofford, Everett, and Olmsted describe Mexican women swimming naked in the river, Mexican babies rolling in the dirt, Mexican men laboring in the fields. This image of Mexicans as more primal and earthy than whites extended even to descriptions of houses in San Antonio. While German and American houses were neat, fresh, and well-roofed, Mexican houses were made from the ground, plastered with mud and river-grass or built from earthen adobe bricks.

Taken together, nineteenth-century American writers used romanticized descriptions of San Antonio's landscape and people to sell the city to prospective tourists, businesspeople, and settlers. This became especially important when the railroad reached San Antonio in 1877, turning the city into a crossroads between the Eastern and Western United States.[16] The city's population, which had never risen above 20,000, was at 31,000 by 1890 and 54,000 by 1900.[17] In earlier times, Spanish priests and generals had also described the river's beauty, but in much more practical terms, naming trees and reporting a plenteous supply of fish and berries. White visitors fetishized the river and the people who lived along it, partly for commercial reasons. An

aqueous fairyland, inhabited by exotic and scantily clad women, was an image that sold like no other.

The San Antonio Chamber of Commerce seized on this problematic legacy to market the city to tourists and investors in the early 20th century. Although quick to remind businessmen and investors that San Antonio was a "great American City," they embedded their description of the contemporary San Antonio in the city's past as "a little pueblo of Indians in a valley of golden sunlight," who "made a picture of contentment on the banks of a little stream that bubbled out from crystal springs."[18] While the guidebooks describe San Antonio's "quaint Latin atmosphere,"[19] their images show white people fishing, golfing, and motoring. Brown people only appear as workers in graphics about local agriculture.

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Back cover from a 1919 guidebook published by the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. Photograph taken by author at the San Antonio Conservation Society Library.

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Page from a 1930s city-published tourism magazine, Picturesque San Antonio. *Photograph taken by author at the San Antonio Conservation Society Library.*

Water and Mexican Americans occupied the same space in these texts: a charming natural resource to be used by white leaders for social and economic progress. Chamber of Commerce guidebooks also emphasized that the water in San Antonio was cheap and clean, managed effectively by a for-profit corporation.[22] In the same breath, the Chamber advertised the near-absence of labor unions and the availability of private artesian wells for large companies.[23]

And so, drawn by evocative accounts of the land's prosperity and carried by the new railroad, white settlers poured into San Antonio from the 1870s onward. They built homes, business, mills, and breweries along the river, which would never look the same again. Colonel Brackenridge's waterworks company dried up the springs. Construction obstructed the river near the Commerce Street Bridge where Frederick Law Olmsted had gazed in rapt wonder at the crystal-clear river, now turned a muddy shade of green. And while Prescott, Olmsted, and Everett had once praised San Antonio's "Latin charm," this new version of San Antonio as a Great American City stood on deed restrictions that locked Black and Brown people into sections west, south, and east of the river, cutting them off from resources like municipal water and well-equipped schools.[24] Anglo settlers treated both the water and the non-white inhabitants of San Antonio as resources and spent them as such, destroying what had made the city beautiful and appealing.

Childlike wonder: in search of delight without exploitation

Perhaps San Antonio was destined to grow, positioned as it is atop one of the most abundant natural aquifers in the country. Growth will always bring change. But when I stand next to the Blue Hole today, one hand resting on the rough rock wall that surrounds it, I wonder if things could have been different. I know there is water here; I can smell the sweetness of damp earth and rotting leaves in the bed of the empty spring.

I close my eyes and remember the time an elder of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation brought me here to teach me what Potopatana, the Blue Hole, means to his people. He placed four small piles of tobacco on different parts of the stone wall, making a square around the mouth of the spring. He burned sage and cedar in an abalone shell, letting their scent mingle with the aroma of soggy wood while he drummed and softly sang. He sang to Yanaguana, water spirit, the river's first name.

"In a time before time," he tells me, "Blue Panther pursued Waterbird through the dark corridors of the underworld. Desperate to escape the hungry jaws of his hunter, Waterbird sprang up through a hole in the earth and spread his wings, scattering droplets of water across the land. The droplets became Coahuiltecan Indians, the first people. Yanaguana began to flow from Waterbird's hole, known by the first people as Potopatana."

Adriana Garcia illustrated this legend of the Blue Hole in her mural *De Todos Caminos Somos Todos Uno* ("From all paths, we are all one"), printed on mosaic tiles and displayed along the linear San Pedro Creek Culture Park. An egret and a spotted panther, both painted in transparent blue, guard both ends of the mural. Coahuiltecans, Spanish explorers, Anglo settlers, and *mestizo* families stand between the egret and the panther, all moving towards the center of the mural.

The center shows children playing in the pool at San Pedro Springs Park. A Mexican-American girl with her hair in braids leaps into the air, laughing and bathed in crystalline spray. The springs behind her are not the San Pedro Springs of today, which are still and shallow. They are blue and bubbling, bursting out of the ground and rushing towards the airborne girl like sunbeams stretching for an angel. These are the springs where Father Damien Massanet first encountered the Payaya people, when they welcomed him into a grove laced with vines and

bordered by cottonwood trees, oaks, cedars, and mulberries.[25] In the 1850s, Richard Everett called these springs "one of the most beautiful natural sheets of pure water in the Union,"[26] clear enough to show the delicate roots of-water lilies.

Maybe, in the world of the painting, the laughing child has special access to parts of the river that have already vanished. Maybe her innocence exempts her from loss. She delights in the water because it is wet and cool, because she is there playing with her mother, and because she is happy. Unlike adults who have drained the river dry through construction and exploitation, she does not need to own, alter, or control the springs to enjoy them. The child's love for the river is love without possession. Her delight is delight without conditions. Many people who grew up in San Antonio before the Riverwalk expanded south of downtown have loved the river in this way.

Rivers ran in the blood of Enrique Sánchez. He was born in Tampico, Mexico, a land surrounded by lagoons, built on a river that flowed straight into the Gulf of Mexico. Although neither of them swam, Enrique and his older sister Lilia would take canoes to the river and explore Tampico together, paddling through rapids and around sharp bends. When Enrique was ten, his family migrated to Laredo, Texas. Again, he lived by a river, this time the *Río bravo del norte* (better known as the Rio Grande). Summers in Laredo were much hotter than in Tampico. Sometimes the air was so oppressive that Enrique felt he could barely breathe. One day, sitting by the river and watching people cross the bridge between Texas and Mexico by foot and by car, he decided he would learn to swim.

> I took off all my clothing and started, not to swim, but just to go gently into the water. There were some rushes and I would hold my breath. My thing was five, count to five. I ducked my head under the river. And then I said, OK, try ten! I was trying to get the fear of water away from me. And then, suddenly, I let go, and I noticed that my body was in the same position as in my mother's womb. I floated! That's the way I taught myself to swim.[27]

At age fifteen, Enrique's family moved north from Laredo to San Antonio, Texas. They bought a house west of downtown, just a few blocks away from the corner store where the girl he would marry worked every day after school. He heard there was a river in San Antonio and a creek near his house, but was disappointed to find the river so shallow and still, and the Alazan-Apache creek barely knee-deep. Still, he remembers watching the creek rise suddenly during heavy rains, lapping at the doorsteps of his neighbors' houses. His father wanted to know the source of the Alazan-Apache creek and so they followed it together, tracing the water to San Pedro Creek and then following San Pedro Creek all the way to the springs at San Pedro Park.

Enrique took to frequenting the southern part of the river, down by Mission Concepcion. There, he taught his two younger brothers to swim the same way he had learned, leaping blindly into the water. The current flowed quickly near Concepción at the time, cutting a deep channel. A little bridge arched over the river, low enough to grab from the water. Enrique taught his brothers to use the underside of the bridge like monkey bars, half-kicking, half-swinging their way from the bank to the center of the river where the current ran strongest. The water hit with such force that it was impossible to resist for long.

"Now jump!" Enrique would shout to his brothers, dangling from the ramshackle bridge and struggling against the current. "Swim, or else you're gonna sink!"

And they swam, both of them, just like Enrique learned to swim in the Rio Grande.

In 1945, at age 17, Enrique joined the navy. Because he joined at the tail end of the war, his enlistment lasted for only two years. Enrique grew during his time in the military and returned home owning only his navy clothes. On his first day back, his mother was so proud that she started inviting everyone who passed her house to come inside and meet her son – *"ha llegado mi hijo!"*

That day, Enrique met Isabel. She worked at the corner store and lived only three blocks away, but he somehow never ran into her before his deployment. It was love at first sight. Enrique and Isabel went on their first date the day after a heavy rain, and a passing bus sprayed muddy water from the unpaved roads all over Enrique's new set of plain clothes. He changed into his navy uniform and they caught a bus heading north, towards Brackenridge Park. Isabel and Enrique returned often to this park, walking and talking and watching people swim in the river at Lambert Beach.

Enrique passed all these memories of the river down to his own children. His son Javier remembers picnicking by the river at Concepción Park and visiting the pool next to San Pedro Springs, although many of the river beaches and natural spring-fed pools had started to close. With his dad and brothers, Javier learned to catch and clean perch, bringing them home for his mother to fry. He used string and leftover chicken to catch crayfish in the Alazan-Apache creek, and harvested watercress for soups and salads. Today, the creek is barely a trickle in a trapezoidal cement channel, but Javier remembers it as a food source. His biology teacher at Cooper Middle School took his class down to the creek to collect animal specimens, and he and his brother traversed the creek every summer morning, distributing newspapers brought from the stand at the old Produce Terminal on Sabinas street. They could have taken the road, but they preferred to walk along the creek.

Enrique and Javier grew up touching the water. Touching the water – this concept doesn't seem extraordinary. But it has been decades since the San Antonio River was safe for swimming. Javier remembers clearly the first time he witnessed contamination. Apache Packing Company, a meatpacking house, used to stand on Sabinas Street with its back to the creek. One day, he went down the creek to play with his brothers and noticed big pipes coming out the back of the brick

building. Hazy liquid poured from the pipes into the creek. Enrique learned that any water beyond Sabinas Street was polluted, and the crayfish and watercress would not be safe to eat.

Growing up near the Alazan-Apache Creek, which flows first into the San Pedro Creek and then into the river, Enrique and Javier learned to love and live cooperatively with the water. Although the San Antonio River was not as beautiful as the rivers in Tampico or as powerful as the Rio Grande, it became for them a place of romance and recreation, a food source, an orienting feature in the geography of their neighborhood.

These intimate relationships between people and the river are rare today in any part of city, but disappeared first from downtown. Groundwater wells and utility pipes meant people could drink and bathe without even going outside. City-dwellers no longer felt like they needed the river as they once did, when there was no other way to water their gardens or wash their clothes. And when human beings feel we no longer need something, we are inclined to mistreat it, discard it, even forget about it altogether.

Many San Antonians have forgotten how to delight in the taste, touch, and smell of the river, now confined behind cement and railings. When the Riverwalk expanded north and south of downtown, riverside activities also broadened to include running and biking as well as dining and shopping, but almost no one touches the water. For most of us, the river is at best an object of occasional visual pleasure.

But whether we attend to it or not, the river has refused to be forgotten. As San Antonio grew and modernized, encroaching on the river's wild banks, she lashed back with a force that no one could resist.

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[1] Adriana Garcia. *De todos caminos somos todos uno,* 2018, digital image transfer on ceramic tile, 11 x 11.7 feet, San Pedro Creek Culture Park, accessed February 14, 2020, https://spcculturepark.com/about/art/de-todos-caminos-somos-todos-uno/

[2] Richard Everett, "Things in and About San Antonio," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, 1859).

[3] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A journey through Texas* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1978), 156-7.

[4] Harriet Prescott Spofford, "San Antonio de Bexar," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* (New York, 1877).

[5] Olmsted, 149.

[6] Olmsted, 157.

[7] Everett

[8] Ibid.

[9] Olmsted, 162-3.

[10] Olmsted, 161.

[11] Prescott Spofford, 837-8.

[12] *Primitive bathing, near San Antonio*, March 1764, photograph of an engraving, UTSA Special Collections Digital Collections, San Antonio, TX, accessed April 22, 2020, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p9020coll008/id/10048/rec/1

[13] Prescott Spofford, 850.

[14] Fray San Antonio de Buenaventura, cited in "San Antonio Springs and Brackenridge Park," Hydrogeology of the Edwards Aquifer (web), accessed December 4, 2018.

[15] Journal of Alvaro Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, cited by Karen E. Stothert, *The Archaeology and Early History of the Head of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1989), 45.

[16] Richard A Marini, "Late to arrive, railroads transformed San Antonio into a 'modern city,'" *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio, TX), April 18, 2017.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, 1919), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[19] *San Antonio Booster's Guide Book* (San Antonio, TX: The San Antonio Light, 1924), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[20] *San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, 1919), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[21] *Picturesque San Antonio,* 1933-6 (San Antonio, TX: Municipal Information Bureau, 193--), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[22] *San Antonio Booster's Guide Book* (San Antonio, TX: The San Antonio Light, 1909), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[23] *San Antonio Booster's Guide Book* (San Antonio, TX: The San Antonio Light, 1912), accessed in the archives of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[24] Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) 5, 12.

[25] Damien Massanet, "Diary Kept by the Missionaries, Begun on May 16 and Finished August 2, 1691," in The Expedition of Don Domingo Teran de los Rios into Texas, ed. Paul J. Folk (Texas Catholic Historical Society, 1932), 54-55.

[26] Everett

[27]Interview with author, San Antonio, TX, December 14, 2019.

3 - Disaster

One morning, ten-year-old Mickey walked from his home on Old Corpus Christi Road down to the river, like he did most vacation days. He used the river to swim and fish, alone or with his cousins. During the long, hot summers, they dove into the *pielago¸* a deep swimming hole formed by water rushing over the old stone dam at Bergs Mill. Underneath the river's frothy surface, Mickey could feel the dark shapes of perch and bass. The river teemed with aquatic life, and not just fish. Swimmers had to keep a close eye on the banks, where venomous water moccasins wrapped around tree branches and hung over the river like vines.

Today, though, something was different. As Mickey crossed the grounds of Mission San Juan and approached the thick cluster of pecan trees that surrounded the river, he noticed an unfamiliar stench. When he finally made it past the trees and to the bank, tears sprang to his eyes. His stomach churned. Thousands of fish floated belly-up in the water. The channel Mickey had swum in only the day before reeked of death.[1]

San Antonio has a legacy of polluting the river. From the tale of a Russian doctor who dumped boiled body parts into the river after the Council House Fight,[2] to the wastewater that poured out of the infamous Rilling Road sewage plant,[3] we have expected the current to carry away our unsightly leftovers. The river keeps flowing all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, carrying with it the underbelly of life in San Antonio.

Steve grew up south of town, past the San Antonio River's confluence with the Medina. He spent summers fishing and wading in the shallow Conquista Crossing and camping with friends on three islands that subdivide the river's seventy-yard channel. Then, in the 1960s, contamination from inadequate wastewater treatment began flowing south. The crystal-clear water of Conquista Crossing turned black and thick with sludge, obscuring the limestone bottom

barely a foot below the surface. After downing a few beers at Cattleman's Bar in Falls City, Steve and his friends joked about replacing the green road sign that said "San Antonio River" with one that said "San Antonio Sewer Ditch." Although the physical contamination at Conquista Crossing has cleared, the damage was permanent. People began avoiding the crossing, making it a perfect site for drug deals. The landowner closed off all access to the river, which is now clean but inaccessible to people who might want to fish, swim, or camp there.[4]

Since Anglo settlement, occupants of San Antonio have treated the river as a resource, an object to be exploited for human purposes. Some purposes, like fishing, swimming, washing, and irrigation, were benign. Others killed the fish behind Mickey's house, made the crawdads in Alazán-Apache creek poisonous to eat, and turned once-beloved swimming holes into toxic swamps.

But the river has not been passive. Quite the opposite: the San Antonio River has reacted violently to human modification by transporting toxins, spreading disease, and engulfing the city in vicious floodwaters. Sometimes, the river reacts by concealing itself completely, as in the fencing of the river near Conquista Crossing, or the vanishing of the springs.

The river has always swelled and shrunk in a natural rhythm, following the seasons of drought and rainfall. These movements have not always resulted in floods because, for most of the river's history, people lived in temporary encampments, migrating with the same natural seasons that regulate the rise and fall of the river. Archaeological records suggest that the Coahuiltecan people lived off the land, harvesting whatever was in season. They traveled to follow available plant foods, such as prickly pears in the summer and pecans in the fall.[5] Mobile, without permanent structures, Coahuiltecan bands did not have to worry that the river might destroy their livelihoods.

As a city grew, however, the once-quiet river valley became daily less compatible with the cycles of the river. Floodplains of earth and grass absorb excess water, slowing the swell of the river after a heavy rainfall. Urban growth covers the ground in impermeable surfaces, like roads and roofs. Water that would normally sink into the soil pools on top of city streets. Urbanization also uproots trees, shrubs, and grasses, whose roots slow the onslaught of floodwaters and erosion. Because the San Antonio River is fed in part by runoff from the Hill Country, developing the land between the Hill Country and the San Antonio River Basin keeps the ground from absorbing water and intensifies flooding.

A series of urban floods struck the city between 1865-68. According to the Express-News, actually, the 1868 inundation was only "almost a flood," although the river rose three feet and water "overflowed Market street, running several inches deep into some of the houses."[6] Apparently the wind blew so strongly during this storm that the roof of one Mr. Penteurieder took flight, knocking down several chimneys before it finally crashed to the ground one hundred yards away.[7] Less than a month later, San Antonio had 14.5 inches of rainfall between a Saturday and a Tuesday, knocking down the newly-built walls of Santa Rosa Hospital, washing away a bridge near Lewis Mill, and drowning a number of gardens. "Our luxuriant gardens will suffer considerably from the great quantity of rain," reported the *San Antonio Express*. "Cabbages must be picked to keep from decay."[8]

While the river assaulted chimneys and cabbage-patches when it flooded, its water level had begun to shrink during periods of average to low rainfall. Starting in 1888, companies had begun to drill artesian wells to draw water directly from the Edwards Aquifer. The Crystal Ice Company drilled first, followed by Colonel George Brackenridge's San Antonio Water Works.[9] As pumping increased, natural springs like the Blue Hole and San Pedro Springs slowed to a

trickle, and then to nothing but moisture on the ground. Water that used to rush up from the aquifer and burst out of the springs now filled artificial wells and poured into pipes.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the flow of water in the San Antonio Springs had dropped to a twelfth of what it was before. Instead, runoff from Pearl Brewery and the Old Lone Star Brewery replenished the river, which became shallow and muddy.[10] When the waterline receded during dry spells, passers-by saw trash clinging to the river's exposed banks.

Architects designed new buildings near the river to face the street, turning their unpainted brick backsides and rickety fire escapes to the stream, which had started to seem more like a ditch. Ignoring the river, however, did not make it disappear. In October of 1913, sudden rainfall caused the river to spread twenty-five feet out over its banks, damaging buildings and halting railway traffic.[11] One-hundred and thirty firefighters stayed awake for 36 consecutive hours, working with sandwiches in one hand and machine oil in the other.[12] Rescuers exchanged cars for horse-drawn carriages, since horses could wade through the frothy brown water until their wagons began to float. Other heroes rode on top of buses, rushing through flooded streets like River Avenue to collect the people clinging to bedposts and balconies. But not everyone was saved.

A family south of downtown awoke at 10:00pm to find their house almost completely surrounded by water. Juan Villanueva, his 36-year-old wife Amelia, and their children Olga (7), Freisa (5), and Amelia (1) fled the house immediately. They waded towards what had been a low water crossing, but soon found that the ground all around them had become a river with no discernable beginning or end. Juan grabbed onto a tree and reached out for his wife, but his hand missed hers by inches. Amelia and the three children were drowned, and their bodies never located. Juan managed to clamber up the tree and spent the night there, shivering and alone, until

the police received a tip the next morning about a man hanging from a mostly submerged tree near Mission San Jose.[13]

FLOOD BRINGS SWIFT DEATH AND TERROR

Fed By Incessant Rains Limpid Stream Becomes a Raging Torrent

Silently the storm water shed from the hills crept into the city. In its race to the sea the volume each minute became greater and rose higher until the narrow channel of the river burst, spilling the flood over the lowlands and into the homes of hundreds who slept unconscious of their danger. Not until the floating drift riding the swift current began battering houses and the chilling tide rose waist deep in their bed chambers did many awake. It was then the City's firemen, its policemen, the soldiery and volunteers plunged into the deepest of flood in their mission of rescue. Their heroism will always be one of the brightest pages in the annals of San Antonio. Four persons is the toll in human life and their bodies are yet to be found. The property loss is $250,000.

FOUR DROWN; MANY SAVED; $250,000 LOSS

Heroic Work of Firemen, Policemen and Soldiers Prevents a Greater Loss of Life.

WATER WAIST DEEP IN STREET

To Prevent Recurrence of Overflow Mayor Brow Favors Construction of Great Dam Nea Headwaters of the San Antonio River—Flo Records of the Long Ago.

Four deaths, a property loss of a quarter of a million dollars, flig to higher grounds and scores of thrilling rescues tell in a nutshell wh occurred between midnight and dawn yesterday morning when the San A tonio River flooded a wide, irregular area of the city. Fed by the sto waters of excessive rains falling in the higher ground north of the ci the river once again became a raging torrent. This almost unprecedent rise came not with a roar, but flowed into the heart of the city so silen that few only were aware of a tense situation until firemen, policemen a soldiers came to take them away.

That the flood did not exact a great toll is chargeable alone to the cunning ingenuity of those whose occupation leads them day by day into danger. Those nerves did not, like the terrorized folk, fetter nor cripple. They drove into the thickest of the flood and with vehicles, horses or ropes dragged to a safer place a lot of quivering humanity. It was for the greater part done under the cover of darkness. An excess of water had crippled the lighting service and there were only the flickering, yellow rays of a lantern or candle to mark the way in the wo of rescue.

SWIM IN THE STREETS.

Men, women and children cut off entering and muddy waters were fou huddled alike in humble cottages or m pretentious homes. At some places water was so deep firemen erected la ders to rescue the persons who sou refuge in the second stories of building As an illustration it was almost possi to swim horses on some of the stre intersecting St. Mary's Street. In the tered thoroughfare youngsters, imbued w the inquisitive spirit of youth, jumped and found they had to swim or

14

A clipping from the San Antonio Express-News on October 3, the day after the flood

Perhaps most shocking is that only 3.3 inches of water fell that night.[15] The city was not prepared for rainfall, even though long-time San Antonians had lived through many floods and knew to expect them. City Council called an emergency meeting. At the meeting, City Clerk Fred Fries pulled out an old report of the 1865 flood and presented it to the Council.[16] In 1865, he explained, water had risen by 14 feet, the business district was devastated, hundreds of people were made homeless, and one woman died. The same amount of rain had fallen in 1832, with only minimal damages. Between 1832 and 1865, the city had grown rapidly, mostly due to an influx of Anglo settlers. Since the railroad's arrival in 1877, San Antonio's population had

exploded.[17] People erected buildings along the river, devouring the absorbent natural floodplain of grass and soil and walling the river in with brick, stone, and cement. When runoff from heavy rainfall thundered down from the hill country via Olmos Creek, it found nowhere to go. It could no longer sink into the ground. Stormwaters raged in the imprisoned channel, and the river overflowed.

For years, mayors and city council members had discussed building a dam in the Olmos watershed, just north of where Olmos Creek empties into the San Antonio River. Immediately after the flood in October 1913, old-timers who remembered other similar disasters urged the mayor to build the dam. “While this is the first time in many years the San Antonio River has been on such a rampage,” they warned, “there is no telling when the elements will combine to again cause such a situation.”[18]

Such a rampage did come again, only three months later. On December 5, downtown streets flooded with water up to three feet deep, forcing everyone to revert from automobiles to horse-drawn carriages.[19] Because rescue services were prepared after the events of October, losses were slight: no deaths, and only $50,000 of property damaged (a $1.3 million value today).[20] Still, the people of San Antonio lived in growing dread of the wild river.

“Procrastination is not only the thief of time, but it is the trapdoor to ruin,” warned an editorial in the San Antonio Express. “This danger can be most effectually, safely, and economically solved by the building of a retention wall or dam where the waters of the Olmos watershed empty into the San Antonio River.”[21]

And yet, it took a final flood, more terrible than all the others, for the City of San Antonio to build the dam. Around midnight on Saturday, September 10, 1921, water from Olmos Creek crashed into the headwaters of the San Antonio River, pushing them over Brackenridge Park and

River Avenue. Caught unawares, streetcar crews fled for their lives, abandoning their empty cars to ruin. The downtown business district was devastated, with water up to eight feet deep on Houston and St Mary's streets. Water rose to the ceiling in some homes, so that a man had to pull his wife and child out of the house on a floating mattress.[22]

"A brother and I walked down to town on Main Avenue," recalls Manfred Gerhardt. "We walked all the way down to Houston Street, and the water was knee deep under a clear sky with a big, full moon. It was a terrible experience."[23]

VOLUME LVI—NO. 240. SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 11, 1921. EIGHT PAGES ESTABLISHED 1865.

KNOWN FLOOD DEAD 39, SCORE MISSING

MILLIONS DAMAGE DONE BY SWEEP OF WATER IN STREETS

Stores Flooded, Banks Closed, Lights and Water Are All Shut Off

Practically all of San Antonio's business district is damaged. The commercial life of the Alamo City is paralyzed. All theaters are closed. Banks are closed. In all the vast section of the principal business portion not a store opened for business; not a wheel turned at the usual hour yesterday morning. Not one building escaped. Owners of buildings and tenants make rough attempts to even estimate the approximate money value of their losses, but it is known that the total will run into several million dollars.

But two restaurants attempted yesterday morning to operate in a section measuring six by six blocks north and south and ten blocks east and west. All

RIVER RISE BRINGS WIDESPREAD LOSS

Flood Statistics

Total rainfall in two days, 7.30 inches. Total rainfall in 24 hours ending at midnight, 6.68 inches. Water raised nine to water, one foot every 10 minutes from 11:30 until 1 o'clock. Heaviest rainfall ever record here, 5.08 inches in 24 hours, October 1 and 2, 1913. Next heaviest rainfall, 4.34 inches, April 16, 1913. Wind velocity, highest at 4:0 a. m. Friday, 56 miles per hour.

2,000 Victims Given Aid By the Red Cross

Caught Unaware, Sleeping, Scores Are Suddenly Swept Off

Flood waters from three streams, the highest since 1845, and 20 inches above the record mark set that year, brought death and widespread property-damage to San Antonio business and residence districts between midnight and daylight Saturday morning.

Thirty-nine persons are known to be dead, 4 are missing, and 23 injured are being cared for in the Robert B. Green Memorial Hospital and Santa Rosa infirmary. Dozens of others were taken to the hospitals during the day and dismissed as suffering only from

Death List, Revised

MRS. ROSA RAMIREZ, 55. Lived between El Paso and San Fernando Streets.

MRS. GUADALUPE B. FALCON, 50, 322 North Santa Rosa Street.

MRS. JENNIE VASBINDER, about 40 years, 124 Cass Avenue.

MRS. EMMA GORIN, 24, 444 Furnish Avenue.

GILBERT GORIN, 9-months-old son of Mrs. Emma Gorin.

N. A. McCALEB, 40. Lost while jitney passenger.

MRS. FRANCISCO RAMIREZ SOTO, 40, 314 Chihuahua Street.

MRS. IGNACIO LOPEZ, 25, Greeven Steet. Body found at Pfleffling Stock Yards.

JUAN JOSE FALCON, 60, 705 South [illegible]n Marcos Street.

MRS. VICTORIANA FALCON, 60, wife of Juan Jose Falcon.

ALICE D. DREAGER, 9-months-old daughter

[24]

Clipping from the San Antonio Express on September 11, 1921

The initial death count was 39, rising to 45 by September 12[25] and 49 by September 13.[26] Relief workers spent hundreds of hours combing through debris, raking up carcasses of chickens and small animals[27] before the final human death toll settled at 51. Dozens more were hospitalized for related injuries. Most flood victims lived south or west of downtown, on streets like South Flores and South Laredo where the San Pedro, Martinez, and Alazán creeks converged,[28] inundating the unpaved dirt roads and poorly built homes. One twelve-year-old boy spent five hours clinging to a tree on South Flores with only his legs, using his arms to hold a five-year-old child above his head until rescuers arrived.[29]

Floods turned the city inside-out. H.T. Edward Hertzberg, then sixteen years old, sat on the front porch of his Crofton Avenue home with his family and watch the water creep over their lawn, thick and black with an inch of spilled petroleum from gas tanks that had burst upriver.[30] Mounds of debris piled south of the river: shredded paper, destroyed furniture, the corpse of a dead horse.[31]

When the river overflowed, people had to witness the potent relationship between human life and the life of the river. A healthy river had blessed San Antonio with growth, agriculture, and industry, but an unhealthy river had wrecked the business district, ruined crops, and killed people.

The city and the river went to war. Gone were the days when the river was a gentle mother, nourishing and beautifying San Antonio. Once, it had slipped in and out between fine summer homes made of gleaming wood,

> clear as crystal, swifter than a mill-race; now narrow and foaming along between steep banks rich with luxuriant semi-tropical growth, and with the tall pecans on either side meeting above them in vaulting shadow; now spreading in sunny shallows between long grassy swards starred with flowers, twisting and turning and doubling on itself…eddies and falls and arrowy curves, reach after reach of soft green gloom and flickering sunshine each more exquisitely beautiful than the other.[32]

As urban growth crowded the river, she became not a symbol of life, but an eyesore and a threat. Some people wanted to respond aggressively by eliminating the river. They proposed digging a thirty-foot channel and burying the entire stream underground as an invisible sewage system. Others wanted to turn the river into a park.[33] Everyone agreed the city must build Olmos Dam to keep runoff water north of the city from wrecking the downtown business district.

The river had become wild. One flood survivor compared it to a Bengal tiger that had not eaten in three days, ravenous and mighty and ready to pounce.[34] We call something “wild” when

we cannot control it. But could something as vast as a 240-mile river, impossible to catch or cage, ever be tamed?

In the times between floods, while city government planned and consulted with engineering firms, people who loved the river suffered along with it. Mickey, now well into his seventies, still remembers the pain of seeing his river – he thought of it as his, because the river had been as much a fixture in his life as any relative – mottled with the corpses of poisoned fish. That day, he had meant to take out the raft he and his cousin had found adrift upstream, riderless and untethered. They considered it a gift from some beneficent spirit in the vein of Huckleberry Finn. But float the raft on a river full of death? Mickey did not have the heart, or the stomach, for that. He turned his back to the river and trudged home, past the crumbling walls and silent bell tower of Mission San Juan.

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[1] Mickey, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, September 20, 2019.

[2] Maury Maverick's interview of Willian Corner, cited by Mary Ann Noonan-Guerra, *The Story of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio River Authority, 1978), 51

[3] Olga and Josie, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 1, 2019.

[4] Steve, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, October 1, 2019.

[5] Karen E. Stothert, *The Archaeology and Early History of the Head of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1989), 45-8. 39

Thomas R. Hester, Digging into South Texas Prehistory: A Guide for Amateur Archaeologists (San Antonio, TX: Corona Pub., 1985), 45.

[6] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), March 11, 1868.

[7] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), March 12, 1868.

[8] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), July 8, 1869.

[9] Lewis Fisher, *American Venice* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 2015) 20-1.

[10] Fisher, 23.

[11] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 2, 1913, 1.

[12] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 3, 1913, 3.

[13] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 3, 1913, 2.

[14] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 3, 1913, 3.

[15] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 2, 1913, 1.

[16] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 3, 1913, 4.

[17] Richard A Marini, "Late to arrive, railroads transformed San Antonio into a 'modern city,'" *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio, TX), April 18, 2017.

[18] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), October 3, 1913, 5.

[19] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), December 5, 1913, 3.

[20] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), December 5, 1913, 5.

[21] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), December 5, 1913, 6.

[22] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 11, 1921, 1.

[23] Manfred J. Gerhardt, Reminiscences, June 1989, typewritten document, accessed at the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[24] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 11, 1921, 1.

[25] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 12, 1921, 1.

[26] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 13, 1921, 1.

[27] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 13, 1921, 6.

[28] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 12, 1921, 1.

[29] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 11, 1921, 1.

[30] H.T. Edward Hertzberg, interviewed by Lupita Fernandez, September 17, 1990, transcript, accessed at the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation Library.

[31] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 14, 1921, 2.

[32] Harriet Prescott Spofford, "San Antonio de Bexar," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* (New York, 1877).

[33] Fisher, 91-4.

[34] [José Quiroga], *La tragedia de la inundación de San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Librería de Quiroga, [1921], 11.

4 - Wilderness

In 1924, the city finally built the long-awaited Olmos Dam. The dam protected downtown, but severe flooding remained normal for many who lived west and south of the city center. Then, like today, residents on the South and West sides of San Antonio were predominately Hispanic and low-income, a product of both legal segregation in schools and neighborhoods and *de facto* economic discrimination.[1]

One anonymous writer, thought to perhaps be the owner of the old *Librería Quiroga*, admonished fellow West Siders to treat the creeks as their enemies and the river as their ally. After all, the river had torn through the business district, devouring establishments on Commerce and Houston Street, while the San Pedro, Martinez, and Alazán-Apache creeks attacked Mexican communities west of downtown. After the 1921 flood, the author wrote (in Spanish):

> The San Antonio River swallowed pianos, velvet carpets, Venetian glass unmatched in style and richness. The Alazán creek drowned children, killed women, destroyed men. And it was our race, the Mexican people, whose scarcity of resources did not permit tall houses in a coveted neighborhood, on a street close to downtown and out of danger, who suffered. It was the children of Mexico, those who lay asleep, unaware of the danger, who awoke in the arms of a monster. It is for the San Pedro and Alazán creeks, then, that we must reserve our hatred. Because the river put an end to wealthy, while these, the traitors, glutted themselves with human flesh.[2]

Although many victims of the 1921 flood were Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who lived along the West Side Creeks, the Olmos Dam project did not protect them. When the city budgeted millions of dollars to dam construction in 1924, it spent a mere $6,000 clearing brush along the San Pedro and Alazán creeks in the West Side.[3] Until a wave of Chicano activism in the 1960s and 70s brought better sewage and water systems to the neighborhood, flooding persisted along the creeks. Isabel, who grew up in the 1930s along the Alazán-Apache creek, remembers rainy nights at home:

> Sometimes it would rain a lot and my mother was there by the door, looking out. Finally, you know, I found out she was just afraid the water would start coming into our yard. My father would always dig something so that the water that was coming in from the street would go out back. He'd dig his own creek. It would go into the little "L" and flow down into the [Alazán-Apache] creek.[4]

West Siders like Isabel and her family had to be vigilant to protect their homes and lives from sudden South Texas rainstorms. And yet, for all the horror of rampant flooding, many West Side residents had a special relationship with the creeks. Javier, Isabel's son, remembers the Alazán-Apache Creek as a wild place, where his middle school science teacher would take the class on field trips. He also recalls the creek as a food source.

> My father taught us how to catch crayfish. We would go down to the creek and you would use bait, a little piece of chicken or whatever, and you would catch them, and we would bring them home and my mother would prepare them. She would boil them. And we would eat crayfish. And watercress. You could get it, bring it home, and eat it as a salad. So that area, I knew, on Zarzamora Street all the way to Sabinas, was pretty wild.[5]

Not everyone spent time by the creeks. Richard, a lifelong West Sider, grew up near Alazán-Apache Creek but avoided it at all costs because he knew La Llorona roamed its banks, kidnapping kids that she mistook for her own drowned children.[6] But others played by the water, hunting for snakes and lizards, and used the creeks to fish, gather watercress, and even water their cows.[7] Left in their natural state, the wild West Side Creeks threatened people with dangerous floodwaters, but also provided a place to recreate and gather food.

Downtown, human relationships with natural bodies of water looked very different. Between the digging of artesian wells, the Waterworks Company, contamination from plants and breweries, post-1921 channelization, and the creation of the Riverwalk in the 1930s, the river running through downtown in 1950 had become unrecognizable. Instead of the tranquil, crystal-clear stream that Frederick Law Olmstead had observed from a bridge on East Commerce Street, the San Antonio river was shallow, green, and glassy. It passed beneath well-trafficked foot and

automobile bridges and between colorful riverfront restaurants like Casa Río, soon to explode with life in 1968 during Hemisfair.[8] No one thought to swim, bathe, or wash clothes in the river anymore, much less use it as a food source.

South San Antonio: Relying on the River

Growing up, Javier did not spend much time downtown, but his father Enrique often took Javier and his brothers to the river near Mission Concepción. Because the river on the South Side was deep and free-flowing, Enrique and Javier could catch and eat not just crayfish, but also perch and catfish. As along the West Side Creeks, people still used the river south of downtown in their daily lives. This had been their way of life for generations.

Even after the missions were secularized in 1793, people continued to live in them and use the *acequias* for irrigation. Land grant records show the Spanish and Mexican governments dispensed Mission lands to private citizens from 1793 through the 1820s.[9] In 1803, ten years after secularization, Spanish governor Juan Bautista Elguezabal wrote that about 300 people lived in the four mostly-ruined missions, including a "few Indians" and "a number of Spanish and people of caste."[10]

Today, many South Side residents can trace their origins to these land grants. One South Sider, Vicente, descends from Pedro Huizar, the famous Spanish master-builder. Legend says that Pedro Huizar designed the Rose Window at Mission San José in memory of his dead sweetheart, Rosa. In reality, Pedro Huizar may have left Spain after the Rose Window was already built,[11] but his family certainly received land grants around Mission San Jose, rooting Vicente's family firmly in the South Side.[12] Vicente spent summer afternoons in middle and high school camping and fishing along the river. Along with five or six friends, he would load his fishing gear onto the single bike they all shared and chase it down to the riverbank. To this day,

Vicente lives in his childhood home and loves to drive along the river, remembering his schoolboy days.

Mickey grew up on Old Corpus Christi road in a house full of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Their house was practically on the lawn of Mission San Juan, so walking to Sunday Mass at the mission took only a few minutes. Mickey's great-great grandmother Barbara Torres received the land he grew up on as part of an 1824 land grant. Of Coahuiltecan descent, Barbara's family had lived in the Alamo, Mission San Juan, and Mission Espada, and was one of the last families to move out of the missions.[13]

South Siders like Mickey formed intimate relationships with the river because they relied on it. Mickey remembers that before city water came to his home in the 1950s, his family pumped drinking water from a nearby ground well. To wash clothes and dishes, they drew water from the river. The river also used to be part of the South Side's economy and food supply, enabling an agricultural lifestyle.

Josie lives in a white adobe house her great-great grandparents built near the Espada Aqueduct in 1854. Until National Park Service forced her family to sell the land in the 1980s, Josie's family farmed their land, irrigating it with water from the Espada acequia. She remembers harvesting onions and radishes as a child, sometimes rinsing off radishes in the acequia to eat on the walk home. Josie and her mother often took the family cow down to the aqueduct to drink. They had to console Josie's younger sister, who feared the cow would drown.[14]

The river shaped the landscape of the South Side, which has always been more rural and agricultural than other parts of San Antonio. Take pecans, for example. Nurtured by abundant water from the river, pecan groves used to flourish on the South Side. Josie grew up filling

burlap sacks with pecans every fall, storing them to cook with and eat in the winter. In years past, some families depended on the water-loving pecans for their livelihood. Agnes Vander Poorten and Jeanne Persyn, daughters of a Belgian immigrant, spent four years living behind Mission San Jose. Their father farmed the land that is today known as Mission County Park. When the 1921 flood devastated his farm, uprooting sweet potato plants and tomato bushes, Agnes and Jeanne's family lived by selling pecans and splitting the profits with a hired thresher. The same river that destroyed their crops sustained these lucrative pecan groves, as well as providing water they used for washing and bathing.[15] Like the Coahuiltecans who may have survived winter by storing up pecans,[16] this migrant family weathered a terrible storm by staying close to the trees and the river.

Once, everyone in San Antonio had needed the river: first, for fresh water and fish, then for agriculture, then for bathing. Paintings and photographs of the downtown river illustrate the change. Etchings from the mid-1800s show images of people washing clothes, fishing, and bathing in the river. San Antonio appears as a pastoral town, built around a peaceful river. After the railroad arrived, images from magazines and guidebooks show white people recreating at Brackenridge Park and the Hot Wells resort. During the early 1920s, almost all photographs of the river tell the story of severe flooding. And by the 1930s, pictures of the downtown river focus on the developing river park, while the less-common photographs of the South Side show people swimming behind old mills or foraging among thick overgrowth. The San Antonio River seemed like a different creature altogether in different parts of the city.

South and West of downtown, the river still seemed wild well in the 1950s. As in a lightning storm or a towering ocean wave, beauty and danger coexisted on the wild river.

Although vulnerable to floods, South and West Siders understood and relied on the river in a way most downtown residents had abandoned decades before.

Taming the wild river

City officials finally paid attention to San Antonio's ongoing flood problem when the stormwaters returned to downtown. On Thursday, September 26, 1946, six inches of rain fell within eight hours, backing up behind the Olmos Dam to a height of 25 feet.[17] Six people died,[18] including two children who drowned in Alazán Creek and two men whose car was washed off the street above San Pedro Creek. As firefighters pumped water out of downtown hotels and businesses, public health officials stepped in to warn people not to drink from ground wells awash with flood-born waste. Given that contaminated water in San Antonio once caused a cholera epidemic, city government had learned that rapidly-spreading floodwaters carried the risk of dysentery, typhoid, and even polio.[19] San Antonians also realized that not even the 80-foot tall, 2,000-foot long cement monolith[20] of the Olmos Dam could contain the river.[21]

A system finally arrived that put an almost complete stop to flooding on the creeks, but it came at a high price. The San Antonio River and Canal Conservancy, later known as the San Antonio River Authority, partnered with the Army Corps of Engineers to develop a comprehensive flood control plan. From the start, this plan demanded that the city choose between natural beauty and physical safety. According to a 1950 Corps of Engineers report,

> "The present channel of San Antonio R. is a beautiful and attractive park feature. The channel is extremely winding, in fact, almost none of it is straight. While this feature adds to the beauty of the channel as a park feature, it greatly reduces its capacity for flood water. Trees and shrubs have been allowed to grow on the banks and berms, thus adding to the beauty of the stream, but at the expense of its capacity to carry away floods."[22]

Not only did the Corps acknowledge that the San Antonio River was more beautiful with its natural sinuous channel and tangled overgrowth, they bluntly admitted that flood control

measures would "destroy the attractiveness of the stream."[23] Still, the plan moved forward, propelled by the fear and urgency the last flood had provoked.

The Corps of Engineers planned to channelize the river from Brackenridge Park to Bergs Mill, just across from Mission San Juan. Later, the project was extended further south, past Mission Espada and Loop 410.[24] This channelization included the West Side creeks: San Pedro, Martinez, Zarzamora, and of course, the deadly Alazan-Apache creek.

"Channelization" involved thousands of steps but can be summed up in three words: straighten, widen, and deforest. The Army Corps of Engineers wanted to first straighten the river's curvature, which obstructed the flow of floodwaters. Next, they would make the channel wider to reduce overflow, take out trees and shrubberies to reduce obstruction of floodwaters, and lay concrete in sections of the riverbed to prevent erosion. Once put in motion, this plan became the San Antonio Channel Improvement Project (SACIP).

The operation would be costly - $12 million in 1955, $37.5 million by 1976, and $40 million more in the 1990 amendatory contract.[25] The outcome would be unsightly. But then, what was $90 million compared to lives and homes lost during major floods? Excavators began to take bites out of the riverbed, while cement mixers and bulldozers rumbled along the quiet banks.

This taming of the river took very different forms in different parts of the city. Engineering firm Metcalf & Eddy had already begun to excavate and channelize the river in 1924. They intended to straighten most of the river's bends, even the famous oxbow loop behind the old Courthouse, but a coalition of well-off and well-connected San Antonio women intervened. The Women's Club, the Conservation Society, and a Federation of Women's Clubs committee united to oppose further changes to the river's course.[26] Parts of the channel were

widened to seventy feet, but some curvature and greenery was preserved. The city pumped aquifer water into the river so it could once again flow freely. The Conservation Society began to design flagstone walkways, small gardens, and atmospheric outdoor lighting to beautify the downtown river. When funding from the Works Progress Administration enabled the creation of the *Paseo del Río*, San Antonio's famous downtown Riverwalk, the city invested millions in romantic stone pathways and bridges, beautifully landscaped alcoves, and majestic cypress trees.[27]

The careful grooming of downtown San Antonio meant that flood control projects in the white-dominated business district were scrutinized and limited. Tearing up the Riverwalk would be unthinkable. South and west of downtown, channelization was something closer to an ecological disaster. When all was said and done, the Alazán-Apache creek would become a cement-lined drainage ditch, dry except for periods of intense rainfall and inhospitable to riparian life. The river and creeks, city and county officials decided, must be quickly domesticated by any means necessary, even if those means meant environmental destruction.

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[1] Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) 5-6, 12-13.

[2] [Quiroga]. *La tragedia de la inundación*, 8-10. Translation by author.

[3] Char Miller, "Streetscape Environmentalism: Floods, Social Justice, and Political Power in San Antonio, 1921–1974," *Southwest Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 2 (October 2014): 168.

[4] Isabel, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, December 14, 2019.

[5] Javier, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, December 14, 2019.

[6] Richard, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, October 26, 2019.

[7] Isabel

[8] Lewis Fisher, *American Venice* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 2015) 129-35.

[9] Bexar County, "San Antonio Missions 1793-1834 Concepcion, Espada, San Jose, San Juan," typewritten listing of land grants, file 570, cabinet 2, drawer 1, Cadena Files, San Antonio Central Library Texana Collection, San Antonio, Texas, United States

[10] Elguezabal, 304.

[11] Lindee

[12] Bexar County, "San Antonio Missions 1793-1834 Concepcion, Espada, San Jose, San Juan"

[13] Mickey, interview with the author, San Antonio, TX, September 20, 2019.

[14] Josie, interview with the author, San Antonio, TX, November 1, 2019.

[15] Agnes Vander Poorten & Jeanne Persyn, interviewed by Esther Macmillan, August 9, 1987, transcript, UTSA Libraries Special Collections Digital Collections, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4.

[16] Thomas R. Hester, Digging into South Texas Prehistory: A Guide for Amateur Archaeologists (San Antonio, TX: Corona Pub., 1985), 45.

[17] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 27, 1946, 1.

[18] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 28, 1946, 1.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Lewis Fisher, *American Venice* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 2015), 78-9.

[21] *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), September 28, 1946, 2.

[22]W.B. Tuttle, *Brief of supplemental economic studies, local flood protection project, city of San Antonio, Texas* (V.L. Beavers & Associates Consulting Engineers, 1950), 21.

[23] Tuttle, 31.

[24] *San Antonio River: Conceptual Plan for Guenther Street to Espada Dam* (City of San Antonio and the San Antonio River Authority, March 1993), 4.

[25] *San Antonio River Authority/Bexar County Flood Control Projects Status Report* (San Antonio, TX, March 17, 1993), Box 115, San Antonio River Authority Collection, UTSA-ITC Special Collections, San Antonio, TX, United States.

[26] Fisher, 88.

[27] Fisher, 82-89.

5 – Home

1930s: The Johnson Street Bridge, which crosses the San Antonio River in the King William neighborhood[1]

1930s: A man gathers aquatic plants along the San Antonio River, near Roosevelt Park[2]

A tale of two neighborhoods

Born in 1950, Maria grew up in a house on Washington Street, in the same King William neighborhood her family had lived in since 1881. The fifties were a period of drought in South Texas, so intense that some ranch families scraped together a lump sum of cash and paid a rainmaker from Arizona to change the weather.[3] The river was only a trickle behind Maria's house, shrouded by her broken-down backyard fence and overgrown cane plants.

Still, to a child, the riverbed felt like a jungle. Maria and her friends snuck down to the banks to play in the tall weeds, stepping carefully to avoid snakes. They watched people dig for worms in the soft soil and try to catch fish in the shallow stream. Cypress, oak, and pecan trees towered above them, spreading cool shade over the banks in the summer and providing shelter during springtime rains. Sometimes, Maria stumbled across people asleep in the tall grass, all their belongings packed into a cloth bundle or a garbage bag. When a silver tea service went missing, Maria's mother marched down to the river with a shovel and began digging in the damp earth. Within an hour, a sharp metal clang rang out over the water. There was the tea service, shining underneath a pile of rotting leaves. Someone had planned to come back and retrieve the loot later.

Once or twice a year, Maria's father phoned Sam Granado at City Hall.

"Sam," he would say, "We've gotta clean up the river."

And within weeks, front end loaders, bulldozers, and lawn mowers would come trundling down the river, flattening bushes, cutting grass, and churning up the paraphernalia of homeless encampments: a blanket with a hole, a shoe without a match, a half-used travel size lotion bottle.

Although San Antonians today imagine King William as a wealthy neighborhood, inhabited by Spurs players and H-E-B executives, the neighborhood has passed through periods of intense change. When Maria's mother was growing up, children took canoes to paddle along the river, something unthinkable in 1950. During World War II, housing shortages in San Antonio meant that many homes were divided into apartments and rented out separately, including in the King William area. When the war ended, people drifted out of Military City, U.S.A, leaving behind empty houses. The population of King William dried up along with the river, and the housing stock fell into disrepair. [4]

One of Maria's neighbors, Jessie Simmons, moved to King William in 1975. A newly single mother from southern Arkansas, Jessie had been fired from her teaching job when administration learned she was pregnant, and she needed a fresh start in an affordable city. Always fond of old houses, she instantly fell in love with the Victorian homes in King William. The ample porches, the elaborately wrought fireplaces, the thick limestone walls and breezeways built for sweltering San Antonio summers – everything was perfect. Jessie bought her home from Walter Mathis, who had been displaced by the construction of I-37 and decided to renovate as many houses in King William as he could. Her co-workers at Kelly Air Force Base thought she had lost her mind. Over and over again, they told her stories of ghostly Victorian houses with

gaping, shattered windows, and of the strange people who supposedly moved through the neighborhood at night. But Jessie never looked back.

> It was such neat place, because everybody was working on a house and so many of us were young and didn't have any money. When we first came, it was very usual to trade labor. I can remember -- there were three of us who moved in right next to each other, almost at the same time, and one Saturday we rented a post hole digger. There were probably twelve neighbors over, and we put fences up all around the houses. And we cooked lunch and people came in and ate lunch and went out and worked on the fence. It was a really tight-knit community. You knew all the neighbors.[5]

Jessie moved into the neighborhood at the same time as the River Authority. Although San Antonio Channel Improvement Project (SACIP) flood control efforts started in 1954, delays and funding constraints meant the Corps of Engineers couldn't begin work in the King William area until after the contract was renewed in 1976.[6] Fred, Maria's future husband, was General Manager of the River Authority at the time. A cohort of new residents, including Jessie, came together with long-standing King William families like Maria's to weigh in on river modification. None of them wanted their river to look like the newly channelized sections near Brackenridge Park, which were straight, boxy, and covered in concrete.[7]

Fred and Maria met because Maria's mother, a member of the Conservation Society, was convinced the River Authority was going to ruin her neighborhood. She was constantly on the phone with Fred, warning him about what would happen if he so much as dared to touch her seventy-year-old pecan trees. Eventually Maria was on the phone, too, talking about more than trees. Perhaps Fred and Maria's harmonious marriage is a useful symbol of how river modification played out in King William. Although not without its complications, the process was, on the whole, peaceful and collaborative. Through King William Neighborhood Association and River Authority meetings, residents morphed the flood control project into a plan for another river park, more verdant and less commercial than the downtown *Paseo del Río.*

Now, Fred and Maria walk their dog by the river in the mornings and grill dinner outside on autumn evenings, watching the leaves change color. Jessie and her husband take glasses of champagne down to their favorite riverside bench at sunset, where they sit and watch the light turn golden and fade over the water. City lights sparkle on the dark surface of the river like so many reflected stars. Because community members like Maria and Jessie participated in river development, SACIP became a project that made them feel more comfortable in their own neighborhoods. Sadly, this was not the case in all parts of San Antonio.

Olga moved from the small town of Elmendorf to a house near Mission Espada in the 1950s, when she was eight years old. In Elmendorf, her family had a ranch, where they raised and slaughtered their own cows. For cookouts, they built underground ovens to cook the cows' heads and make barbacoa. During the last days of summer, she and her sister harvested wild grapes and stepped on them in the bathtub to make wine. They spent torrid afternoons playing in the lake, clinging to their father's shoulders while he shot water moccasins out of the trees. When the fallout of a violent barfight forced her family to leave Elmendorf, Olga and her sister were heartbroken.

The San Antonio River became a balm to their homesickness. At least every other weekend, her family barbecued at Espada Park. Olga, her sister, and the other neighborhood kids swam in the pool that formed below the old Espada Dam. The water fell rapidly from the dam, carving out a swimming hole so deep that not even the tallest person in the neighborhood could touch the bottom with their toes. There, Olga caught her first fish. It was only a tiny perch, but her father picked her up, fish and all, and proudly showed everyone at the cookout what his daughter had done. Olga also learned to swim in the river near Espada, clinging to an innertube and kicking her legs while her family cheered her on.

On days when they did not feel like swimming, Olga and her sister sat on top of the dam, letting the water rush around and underneath them as it raced over the slippery, algae-coated stones. More than two hundred and fifty years before, indigenous craftsmen and laborers had put those stones in place. Sometimes the sisters sat there for hours, not speaking a word, only feeling the sunshine and listening to the water. The spot became sacred to them. When Olga's nephew died in a tragic accident, her sister came back to San Antonio to scatter his ashes at the dam.[8]

Every child who grew up near the Missions before the river was channelized remembers playing in the river. Growing up only yards from Mission San Juan, Mickey spent the six-month San Antonio summer camping, fishing, and swimming in the river. A swimming hole called *el piélago* formed near the old Bergs Mill dam, where Mickey and his friends could swim and dive. Although a strong swimmer, he could never touch the bottom of the *pielago,* and remembers hearing stories of people who drowned in the deep pool. Vicente used to spend his summers camping with friends near the old Espada Dam, which is next to San Juan cemetery. One night, while his friends were building a campfire, Vicente looked up toward the cemetery and saw a ghostly woman on the top of the hill. She was standing perfectly still, long black hair and a black veil streaming behind her. Certain the woman was La Llorona searching for her drowned children, Vicente and his friends stayed up all night to tend the fire and keep her at bay. Vicente laughs and says that no matter what, he will never forget camping on the river. The fright La Llorona gave him is sealed in his memory.

The stories go on. Armando remembers falling asleep next to the river while his parents danced the night away to *conjunto* music at Mission County Park. Rosalinda's family and neighbors had cookouts at least twice a month near Mission San Juan. She and her cousins could run up to the very edge of the river and stand in the reeds, watching for fish, frogs, and turtles.

Josie and her siblings splashed in the narrow channel atop the Espada Aqueduct. To them, it was never a Spanish colonial ruin; it was just a feature of their neighborhood. *Los arcos*, they called it, the arches.

When the Corps of Engineers began work on the South Side in 1958, everything changed. The Corps advanced quickly and adhered strictly to their three tenets of flood control: straighten, widen, and deforest. First, they dug a completely new channel for the river. Euphemistically called a "flood control channel," this was a straighter, wider riverbed. Most of the original winding channel was drained and filled. Only three sections of the original river – near Mission San Jose, the old Espada Dam, and Mission San Juan - were allowed to retain water. The sections near San Jose and San Juan are shallow cutoff bends, where the water is deep green with algae and stands almost still. The section near Espada still includes the old Spanish dam, but it sits in the shadow of a monolithic concrete dam less than fifty yards away, built for the new river channel. To clear a path for floodwaters, the Corps also uprooted hundreds of wizened pecan trees.

Flood control efforts left the river south of downtown almost completely unrecognizable. Instead of a free-flowing stream that sang over rocks and spilled into small waterfalls, sheltered by oak, pecan, cypress, and willow trees, the river became a linear ditch that cut straight through a barren field. Some sections of the river were lined with cement, stark against the naked plain. Deprived of the natural forest, neighbors could stare into other's houses across fields scorched brown by summer heat.

Home and displacement

There are two ways to displace people who live along the river: physically move the river away from them, or force them to leave the river. Intentionally or not, SACIP took the first route.

The next phase of South Side development would follow Option 2, beginning with a 1979 Congressional law that created the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.

This law authorized the Secretary of the Interior to purchase lands within the park's proposed boundaries, as well as any other private lands[iii] "necessary or desirable to provide for public access to, and interpretation and protection" of the park.[9] Although NPS called residents in the area a "vital and traditional part of the missions' evolution,"[10] official orders began to systematically force private owners near the missions to sell their property. In the first wave of land acquisition,[iv] NPS appropriated 80 private properties, amounting to 209.3 acres. Twenty-four were acquired by fee payment, and the remaining 56 by easement or a mixture of fee payment and easement, meaning residents could live on the property for up to twenty-five more years before NPS had full possession of the land.[11] Once NPS marked the park boundaries, landowners could not sell or will their holdings to anyone besides the Park Service.

In the site proposal, NPS emphasized the area's low density and declining population.[12] While these statistics made land acquisition seem more palatable, not all residents wanted to move, evident in their preference for easements over simple buyouts. Many people felt they had no choice but to sell their property, like it or not. Josie's mother lost all her land near the Espada acequia, as did Olga's aunt and uncle. Forty years later, Josie and Olga clearly remember the feeling of loss, and of being powerless to stop it. Jose describes how trapped people felt:

> "National parks acquired all this land. They wanted to preserve the aqueduct, and that's all well and good. I believe in preservation, but not at the expense of displacing families. All these families had to leave. They were bought out, yes, but if they refused to leave, National Parks would have found a way to condemn their land."[13]

[iii] Public or church-owned lands could only be acquired by donation.

[iv] A 1990 amendment to PL 95-629 authorized an expansion of park boundaries, leading to another wave of land acquisition that continued throughout the decade. Acquisition was delayed because the Reagan administration did not budget funds for federal property acquisition. See Don Driver's article "Plan review set for park expansion," published in the San Antonio Express-News on May 20, 1994.

"They take over a lot by imminent domain," Olga added. "You have no choice."[14]

As a young woman, Mary watched NPS empty her neighborhood of people. She married and moved to her husband's house near Mission San Juan in 1983, just a few years after Jessie moved to King William. Most of her neighbors had been around much longer. She remembers chatting over the fence with her next-door neighbor, Mr. Hunt, who had watched Theodore Roosevelt lead the Rough Riders in practice charges up and down the riverbank. In the 1990s, NPS came to the San Juan area with federal authority to buy land. Most people in the neighborhood did not want to fight NPS and sold. Mary's family, however, was young, with all eight children in grade school or college. They spent years in court but still lost most of their original 18 acres, excepting a lifetime easement for the house and the three acres surrounding it.

Since the easement, Mary's husband has passed away, making her the family's final tie to the property. Her children want to resume the fight to keep their childhood home. In the meantime, NPS let Mary's land lie dormant for several years before granting the Food Bank permission to farm on it. Given that wild hogs and other hungry creatures flooded the area when the humans left, farming has met with mixed success.

When NPS bought out their neighbors, Mary's family decided to move to an area with more people and better schools. They returned to the South Side in 2008, hit hard by the global financial crisis. Mary remembers the eeriness of pulling up to the house and finding the whole area void of human presence. No one lived anywhere nearby, not even Father Jim, the San Juan priest with whom she used to exchange neighborly favors. All manner of creatures crawled in and out of her barn, from raccoons to wild hogs. Her children often found strangers asleep on the property.

Twelve years have passed since Mary moved back to the house near Mission San Juan. She has adjusted to the solitude but has had to fight for security measures like a park gate and a clearly marked address. Formerly part of a historic neighborhood, Mary's home now stands alone amid dozens of acres of unused land, left vacant to evoke the pastoral days of the Spanish Colonial Missions. Even the fire department struggles to locate her house – she once dialed 9-1-1 for a small kitchen fire and listened to sirens wailing back and forth along the nearest road, unable to find her with GPS. During the mornings and afternoons, bikers whiz along the trail behind Mary's house, but the nights are silent except for the hushed flow of the river.

NPS argued that acquiring land near the missions was essential, both to preserve the missions and prevent future development that might clash with their historical context.[15] This historical context was, of course, Spanish colonialism. NPS intended to replicate the days of Spanish rule on contemporary Mission lands. The official proposal for the San Antonio Missions National Historic Park lists the San Antonio River as a "historical resource."[16] NPS recognizes the river as the force that bound all the missions, including San Antonio de Valero, to each other.[17] This federally-endorsed history does not include people who have lived near the Missions for generations, often descended from Spanish settlers or Mission Indians.

SARIP and NPS: A Costly Beauty

Even after Mission lands became a National Park, the grounds remained barren and unappealing, scarred by SACIP. In 1993, the City of San Antonio and the River Authority launched a channel improvement project south of downtown that included hike and bike paths, small dams and pedestrian crossings, silt removal, and the planting of trees, grasses, and wildflowers to create a more welcoming habitat for native wildlife.[18] NPS representative Robert C. Amdor wrote to the River Authority in full support of the project, describing it as "a

phenomenal economic generator for the tourism industry of San Antonio."[19] For NPS, cooperation with the River Authority was non-negotiable, especially since the federal vision for the park included a river corridor with paths connecting each mission to the main river.[20] Thus, federal and local agencies began working hand-in-hand with the River Authority to develop the Missions area.

This collaboration gave birth to the San Antonio River Improvements Project, a new initiative to beautify the channelized river. SARIP connected thirteen miles of urban river to the Paseo del Rio, creating the Museum Reach north of downtown and the Mission Reach south of downtown. The Museum Reach was conceived as a catalyst for high-density residential development, business, and the arts, while the Mission Reach was supposed to be a natural, quasi-wild ecosystem, perfect for outdoor recreation.[21] Designed as an ecological restoration project, the River Authority would not only construct parks and trails along the Mission Reach, but also restore the river to its "natural state." This meant adding new "meanders" to the river, creating some deeper pools where fish could thrive, planting trees, and seeding meadows with native Texas grasses. Such restoration was supposed to attract water birds, beavers, and other wildlife that had been displaced by the first flood control project.[22]

Because the Mission Reach lacked the urban density of the Museum Reach, economic development would not result in specific buildings or renovations beyond the Missions themselves, but rather generate a "more desirable living and working environment."[23] Supposedly, SARIP would add value to the South Side and improve quality of life. This third version of the southern river would mimic the original wild, verdant floodplain.

The River Authority held multiple meetings to get public input on SARIP. Attendance was stilted from the start, as many long-time residents of the Missions area had been forced to

move by NPS. Still, people attended, and many supported the concept of beautifying the river. Residents had one primary fear: would the developments aim to make their lives better, or to attract tourists? Would the so-called ecological restoration really support wildlife along the river, or make the South Side a more appealing area for investors and developers?[24]

The answer came late, when SARIP was already well underway. In 2013, water poured into the homes of 27 families who had never been flooded before, despite having lived on the river for generations. Bexar County ruled the area a floodplain, meaning families had to either rebuild to floodplain standards, sell their property to the county, or accept an easement. Financially unable to rebuild,[25] all but five families had to leave the South Side.[26] Instead of aiding families who lived near Mission Espada, the county maneuvered to acquire increasingly valuable Mission lands.[v]

In addition to opportunistic land-grabbing, business-driven development infiltrated the South Side, forcing out long-time residents. In 2014, the city rezoned the Mission Trails RV Community to allow a developer to build luxury apartments. Although residents of Mission Trails organized themselves with help from experienced local activists, city hall brushed off their protests. The rezoning order displaced 300 people.[27] Of the households researchers were able to contact post-displacement, three in five had to leave the Southside. Four families became homeless.[28]

Many people who were not flooded or evicted were priced out. Armando, who grew up near Leon Creek, moved into a house near Mission San Jose twenty years ago. Since arriving, he has become deeply involved in his community, helping to launch the Mission Branch Library

[v] Note: five of the eight South Siders interviewed for this project brought up the Espada flooding without prompting, and all attributed the floods to SARIP.

and adjacent YMCA. He has watched tax rates skyrocket. In 2016, the year after the Mission Reach was completed, property taxes in his neighborhood increased by 30%. Some of Armando's neighbors, many of them descendants of the original Mission Indians, have had to move out because they can no longer afford the prices. Armando, who is of Coahuiltecan descent but not from the Missions, recalls a conversation with a friend at a drum circle meeting:

> "It's gotten so expensive that one of her cousins had to move out because she couldn't afford living with her. To them, that's one of the worst things that could happen because it's their homeland. For them, this is their homeland. You can't leave the Missions if you're a Mission person. This is where your ancestors came from."[29]

Each time people are forced to leave the river, something is lost. As visitors and new residents move into the area, they will develop their own relationships with and memories of the San Antonio River. These memories, however, will be of a different river, transformed by the National Park Service and the River Authority.

"It's beautiful," says Olga, commenting on the latest improvements to the Mission Reach. "Everybody wants to come here. They changed it up and cleaned it up for the tourists. But not for us."[30]

Both agencies have done an excellent job of creating educational materials about the Mission Reach. Given the abundance of online reading material, almost anyone can become well-versed on the Spanish Colonial Missions before setting foot in San Antonio. In-person visitors can either hire a guide or listen to an audio tour as they make their way through the Missions. Signs about the river's pre-Colombian past, hydrology, wildlife, and various transformations dot the Missions and the trails that connect them. All this knowledge is, however, based on research rather than lived experience.

Distant knowledge cannot answer the same kinds of questions as intimate knowledge. No sign can tell people how it felt to plunge into the now vanished *pielago*, straining wrinkled toes

towards the silty bottom but never quite reaching it. A pamphlet cannot explain the peace two teenage girls felt when they sat in silence on the Espada Dam, letting the world and its demands fade into the sound of rushing water. And once the people who have this kind of intimate knowledge about the river are gone, federally funded excavations will not be able to reconstruct their memories as they have the stone walls of the Missions.

A colonial legacy

Why did river development end so differently in King William and the Mission reach? Both are nationally recognized historic districts, but their stories have taken opposite directions. Any answer to this question is complex and difficult to prove. Property values and taxes have risen in the King William neighborhood.[31] Perhaps some families were priced out. Then again, residents tell a triumphant story of restoring beautiful old houses to their former glory, and of resisting city and federal encroachment to preserve their neighborhood. Perhaps proximity to the downtown business district protected the neighborhood. Perhaps a higher population density helped residents organize. Contacts with well-established organizations like the Women's Society, the Conservation Society, and even the River Authority certainly helped King William residents make their case.

But both King William and the Missions carry historical legacies that we cannot ignore. The Victorian homes near downtown were built by Anglo settlers who poured into San Antonio towards the end of the 19th century. They arrived on the newly built railroad pursuing cheap land, warm weather, and commercial opportunities. In stark contrast, Spanish priests built the Missions in the early 18th century to convert, contain, and conscript indigenous people who had lived along the river for centuries. Even after the Missions secularized and fell into disrepair, people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent stayed nearby to farm, still dependent on the

river and the old *acequias*. Perhaps the difference between King William and neighborhoods near the Missions began long before the River Authority was founded, when Father Damien Massanet set up a makeshift cross near the San Pedro Springs and delivered his first mass to the Payayas.

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[1] *Johnson Street Bridge, San Antonio, Texas*, 1930-1937, photograph, UTSA Special Collections Digital Collections, San Antonio, TX, accessed April 22, 2020, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p9020coll008/id/4644/rec/1

[2] *Man gathering aquatic plants growing beside the San Antonio River, Roosevelt Park, San Antonio, Texas*, 1927-1931, photograph, UTSA Special Collections Digital Collections, San Antonio, TX, accessed April 22, 2020, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p9020coll008/id/11250/rec/1

[3] Perry Kallison, interviewed by wife Frances Kallison, July 18, 1976, transcript, UTSA Libraries Special Collections Digital Collections, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4.

[4] Maria, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, December 4, 2019.

[5] Jessie, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, October 24, 2019.

[6] David H. Brune, *Management Report to the Board of Directors, San Antonio River Authority concerning the San Antonio Channel Improvement Project* (San Antonio, TX, January 30, 1968), Box 90, San Antonio River Authority Collection, UTSA-ITC Special Collections, San Antonio, TX, United States.

[7] Jessie

[8] Olga, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 1, 2019.

[9] *An act to amend the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation Act of 1972; to provide for the establishment of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park; and for other purposes,* Public Law 95-692, U.S. Statutes at Large 92 (1978): 3635-3640.

[10] *San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, San Antonio, Texas, Statement for Management* (U.S. Department of Interior/National Park Service, July 1980), 8-9.

[11] *Draft Land Acquisition Plan: San Antonio Missions National Historical Park* (United States Department of the Interior/National Park Service, 1981), Appendix B

[12] *Proposed San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Tex.* (Washington, D.C.: The Secretary of the Interior, 1977), 65-76

[13] Josie, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 1, 2019

[14] Olga

[15] *San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, San Antonio, Texas, Statement for Management,* 8-11, 14.

[16] *Proposed San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Tex.,* 37.

[17] *Proposed San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Tex.,* 9-10.

[18] *San Antonio River: Conceptual Plan for Guenther Street to Espada Dam,* iii.

[19] Robert C. Amdor, correspondence with Fred Pfeiffer, letter (San Antonio, TX: United States Department of the Interior National Park Service San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, March 23, 1993), Box 115, San Antonio River Authority Collection, UTSA-ITC Special Collections, San Antonio, TX, United States.

[20] Site Alternatives 4 and 5 in Proposed San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Tex., 148-160.

[21] SWA Group, Biohabits, Inc., PBS&J, Economics Research Associates, Sprinkle Robey Architects, and Jaster Quintanilla, Inc., San Antonio River Improvements Project Concept Design (July 2001), 6

[22] SWA Group, 36.

[23] SWA Group, 16.

[24] See 1998 public meetings "Conclusions – South Section"

[25] Josie and Olga, interview with the author, San Antonio, Texas, November 1, 2019.

[26] Eileen Pace, "One Year After Major Flooding, All But 5 Espada Families Have Moved Away" Texas Public Radio, May 27, 2014, accessed December 29, 2019, https://www.tpr.org/post/one-year-after-major-flooding-all-5espada-families-have-moved-away

[27] Marisol Cortez, "Making Displacement Visible: A Case Study Analysis of the 'Mission Trail of Tears'" (San Antonio, TX: Vecinos de Mission Trails, May 2, 2017), 3-6.

[28] Marisol Cortez, "Executive Summary of Making Displacement Visible: A Case Study Analysis of the 'Mission Trail of Tears'" (San Antonio, TX: Vecinos de Mission Trails, May 2, 2017), 3

[29] Armando Cortez, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 23, 2019.

[30] Olga

[31] Jessie

6 – The Call

"We found at this place the rancheria of the Indians of the Payaya nation. This is a very large nation and the country where they live is very fine. I called this place San Antonio de Pádua, because it was his day. In the language of the Indians it is called Yanaguana."[1]

When Father Damien Massanet entered present-day San Antonio, his first act was to change the river's name from Yanaguana, a Coahuiltecan word for water spirit, to San Antonio, the Spanish name for St. Anthony. By renaming the river in his language, the Franciscan priest claimed it as Spanish property. Over three hundred years later, the tradition of changing names to establish authority is alive and well in San Antonio.

One sunny November afternoon, I walked to *los arcos*, the Espada Aqueduct, with Josie and Olga, listening to them reminisce about climbing the aqueduct to splash and slide in its slippery channel. Along the way, we stopped to read informational signs posted by the River Authority. Josie burst out laughing when she read the sign for Sixmile Creek. I asked if she knew much about the creek and she shook her head, still laughing.

> "My mom used to say, 'What the hell? Where the hell did that come from? Because all our lives, this creek was called Arroyo de la Piedra. Arroyo means creek, you know, Arroyo de la Piedra. And after the Army Corps of Engineers rerouted it, all of a sudden it was Sixmile Creek."

The river south of downtown, once used for washing, swimming, fishing, and playing, is now a national tourist attraction, claimed in the name of "History" by federal and local government. Reenacting an old colonial technique, officials have given the river new names to cover and consume the words that came before.

It is tempting to say here that the river was not passive in the face of these changes, and that she has not meekly surrendered herself to the vicissitudes of human power-plays. She has not, of course. At the same time, it is hard to understand or translate the intentions of a river who speaks in actions rather than words. For example, flooding at times can seem like a kind of

poetic justice. People abuse the river, encroaching on her floodplain, and she responds by drowning them, like the Egyptian army in the biblical Red Sea. But that metaphor is an oversimplification, one that obscures real human suffering. The people most irreparably hurt by floods in San Antonio are often low-income migrants and members of racial minorities, not downtown business owners. Both experienced property damage, but far more low-income citizens and people of color lose their homes and lives.

The river has been a scene, actor, and instrument in San Antonio's racially divided power struggles. In the late 1930s, when she was a little girl, Sister Marie Alexandrie remembers walking towards the river from her friend's house near Hot Wells at night, crossing the pecan groves to gaze at the stars shining over the water. Instead of stars, she saw a burning cross and dozens of white hooded figures circled around it.[2] The KKK remained active near the river for years, even meeting at a church near Mission San Jose for a time.[3] After the 1921 flood, the KKK made a donation to flood victims, which the mayor accepted and the newspaper reported without a trace of irony.[4] The newspapers did not mention that in the same flood, Black volunteer firefighters from a segregated station were instrumental in saving white lives and property.[5]

Such legacies of violent and entrenched racism do not disappear overnight. Richard, who grew up near the Alazan-Apache Creek, remembers swimming at Bergs Mill in the 1960s and seeing a large homemade sign that said "No N----- Allowed." The sign stayed there for months.[6] Given this disgraceful heritage, perhaps we should not be surprised that development along the San Antonio River has primarily displaced people of color. How then should we respond to racism along the river, especially when it has been underway since the Missions were a twinkle in the King of Spain's eye?

Perhaps the first step should be remembrance. The Coahuiltecan people lived in harmony with the river, and their knowledge of the Blue Hole as a sacred place may have spread even beyond South Texas. In 1924, amateur archaeologist C.D. Orchard was surveying the Olmos Basin when five Ponca Indians approached him. They had traveled from Oklahoma to obtain peyote. Although peyote grows in the desert, not along the San Antonio River, they had stopped to visit the springs. Orchard watched them light a fire and kill it, sending clouds of smoke into the air by smothering the flames with green oak leaves. They puffed cigarettes in each of the four directions, chanting while they smoked. Next, Orchard watched them drink a mix of native plants, vomit, dance around the smoldering firepit, and bury something in the ground. The Poncas told him their pilgrimage was not novel: they were following "an old people's road," which in turn followed the migration route of the buffalo.[7]

A man named Gary Perez showed me the transcript of Orchard's account. Gary traces his ancestry to the Hokan-speaking people of South Texas and has practiced and led peyote rituals for most of his life. Along with Dr. Carolyn Boyd, Gary has extensively researched a cave painting in the Pecos River Valley known as the White Shaman painting. Thought to be at least 4,500 years old, it is named for a dancing figure painted in white near the center of the mural. Perez believes the mural is not only artistic and ceremonial, but also represents perhaps the oldest existing map of South Texas. He posits that four dots painted along a sinuous red line near the center of the mural match with four springs on the Balcones Escarpment in South Texas: Barton Springs, Comal Springs, San Marcos Springs, and the Blue Hole. Perez concluded that native peoples would naturally map Texas by its springs because they usually traveled and camped near a body of water.[8]

The river is ancient. Art like the White Shaman painting and oral accounts like the Ponca pilgrimage are echoes from past generations, reminding us of how much human history she has witnessed. We will never fathom how many people she has saved from thirst, how many fish she has birthed, how many feet have trod along her banks.

"This is part of our cosmological, ceremonial past and present," Perez said, placing an emphasis on the word "present."[9] Descendants of the nomadic indigenous groups of South Texas still exist, even though priests stopped noting their tribal names in Mission documents and many groups are not federally recognized. Some, like the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, still hold peyote meetings on Mission grounds.

Many other San Antonians, including people of Spanish and indigenous descent who do not belong to a tribe, continue to fight for their homes on the river. People often tell Josie she will not be able to keep her house, a historic adobe structure built by her great-great grandparents in 1854. It will be snatched up by the city, fellow South Siders tell her, or by the National Park Service. But Josie is ready to fight. "This is home," she says. "Outside of the South Side, I'm a fish out of water."[10] And so, Josie remains in her family's house, applying for grants to maintain and preserve it as a historic structure. Although the river looks drastically different than it did when she was a child, Josie still takes walks to the aqueduct and the *acequia*, remembering. Official River Authority signs call the trickle beneath *los arcos* "Sixmile Creek," but Josie just laughs and calls it by the name her mother used, *arroyo de la piedra.*

Like Josie and so many others, the river has persisted. Although the river's context has changed dramatically, the water born from the San Antonio Springs has never ceased to nourish those who need it. As recently as the 1950s, before the river was channelized, people depended on Yanaguana for fishing, washing, and relief from the heat. Contemporary river development

projects emphasize her recreational and commercial value, but the depth of relationship possible between a person and a river cannot be measured in calories burned or dollars earned. From the Coahuiltecans, who recognized the stream as a living spirit, to Olga's sister, who entrusted her son's ashes to the river, people and the San Antonio River are bound by spiritual and emotional ties. These relationships are impossible to precisely name or quantify. Now that we rarely touch the river, this is easy to forget.

Perhaps the first step in seeking justice along the San Antonio River is to love it. Not in a fairy-tale way where true love's kiss sets the kingdom right, but in a gritty way, where two people work hard to know and understand each other so they can treat each other with respect. The river already knows San Antonio better than anyone. It is our turn to learn the river's stories, and to recognize the patterns of racially motivated displacement, environmental degradation, and intentional erasure of histories that people in power perceive as inconvenient. Then, we can act to defend the river and the people she has cared for.

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[1] Damien Massanet, "Diary Kept by the Missionaries, Begun on May 16 and Finished August 2, 1691," in The Expedition of Don Domingo Teran de los Rios into Texas, ed. Paul J. Folk (Texas Catholic Historical Society, 1932), 54.

[2] Sister Marie Alexandrie Gieniec, interviewed by Phyllis McKenzie and Esther Macmillan, November 8, 1984, transcript, UTSA Libraries Special Collections Digital Collections, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4.

[3] Armando, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 23, 2019.

[4] San Antonio Express (published as San Antonio Express.) - September 12, 1921 - page 2 September 12, 1921 | San Antonio Express (published as San Antonio Express.) | San Antonio, Texas | Page 2

[5] John Kellogg Kight, interviewed by Jim Sweeney, March 14, 1986, transcript, UTSA Libraries Special Collections Digital Collections, https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4.

[6] Richard, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, October 26, 2019.

[7] C.D. Orchard, March 1976, taped transcript, Incarnate Word College [now University of the Incarnate Word].

[8] Gary Perez, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 6, 2019.

[9] Perez

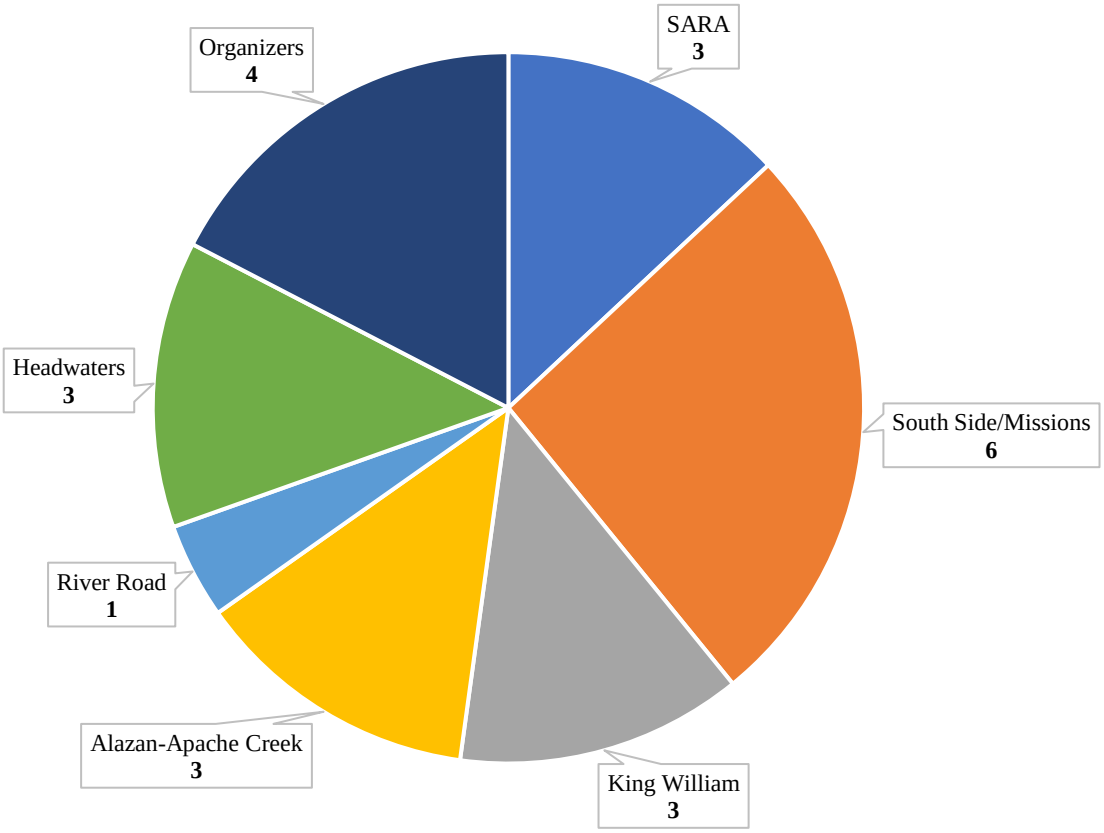
[10] Josie, interview with author, San Antonio, TX, November 1, 2019.

Appendix: Interview Sampling

In total, I conducted 23 interviews with 27 different people, which I broke down into seven different categories:

1. Staff from the San Antonio River Authority (SARA)
2. Community organizers
3. Affiliates (staff and volunteers) of the Headwaters at Incarnate Word
4. Residents of River Road
5. Residents near the Alazán-Apache creeks
6. Residents of King William neighborhood
7. Residents of the South Side/Missions area

There was some overlap in interview content, as some people who live on the South Side now have lived on the West Side in the past, and vice versa. Some interviews included multiple people, often family members. The chart below breaks down the total number of interviews (not the total number of individuals interviewed).



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