

Remembering the Forgotten River



Residents of southern
New Mexico, El Paso
and Ciudad Juárez
share their memories
of growing up with
the Rio Grande

A Southwest Environmental Center oral history

"...Our hope given up, entirely lost...we came upon the roaring River of the North...as if in the Elysian Fields...flowing and pouring down as peaceful, suave, pleasing and mild as though they were a quiet pool, over wide flats and well spread out, and too, with many kinds of fish, most excellently rich and abounding. We found, beside this, much hunting, Of many cranes and ducks and geese...and having hunted and fished much...put in a huge supply of meat and fish...

Gaspar Pérez de Villagra, describing the river near present day El Paso as it appeared to the Onate expedition in 1598.

Remembering the Forgotten River
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We know there are many more stories to tell about the river. If you or someone you know would like to be interviewed for the next edition of this booklet, please contact us (see inside back cover for contact information).

Cover photo courtesy of the Rio Grande Historical Collections of New Mexico State

About this project

The Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo as it is known in Mexico, has long been a central part of the human and natural history of the Paso del Norte region. Wildlife in spectacular numbers were drawn to its waters and lush floodplain. Native Americans were sustained by its natural bounty. Farming communities developed around its life-giving flows, evolving into today's modern cities.

Sadly, the river that has given so much to our region is in need of help itself today. Dams put an end to destructive floods, but they also robbed the river of flows needed to sustain cottonwood bosques. In the name of efficiency, the river was straightened, its banks cleared and its wetlands drained, eliminating habitat for fish and wildlife. Water quality has deteriorated. These and other changes which occurred mainly over the past 70 years have seriously compromised the ability of the Rio Grande to function like the living river it once was.

The Southwest Environmental Center undertook this project to preserve the memories of individuals who witnessed those changes, so that people might know what a healthy Rio Grande was like and what it once meant to the people of our region. We asked a sampling of long-time residents of southern New Mexico, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez to tell us about their experiences and recollections of the river. The stories were collected during 2000 and 2001. This book contains excerpts from some of those interviews. We hope these stories will help keep alive the vision of a restored Rio Grande.

Acknowledgements

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Swimming to Juarez

The river is where I learned to swim. We used to go up to the Last Chance garage. It was nice and deep, and we could dive in there. The river was pretty wide, maybe the length of a football field. By the time I was ten years old I could swim all the way across the river and into Juarez.

You had a lot of whirlpools, and I learned to go into the whirlpools and kick myself out of them. Us kids learned a lot from Tarzan because we went to see a lot of Tarzan movies.

The river was deep enough where we knew we could dive in and we learned to dive in so that we wouldn't hit the bottom. But I would say the river was pretty doggone deep, I don't know, five or six feet deep.

In the winter time we would use our fishing rods, but in the summer time we would go fishing in there in our bathing suits. We would carry icepicks and go down four or five feet. There would be a lot of rocks down there and you could get the catfish out of there. Lots of catfish in the Rio Grande, pretty good size ones. A buddy and I went seine fishing one time and we caught a catfish, oh I don't know, 30 to 35 pounds.

We had lots of beans and tortillas, but if you wanted a delicacy you would go out and fish for catfish or carp. The fishing was pretty good back then. Any fish that you caught went home because it was part of the menu.

We had some big cottonwood trees back then. But most of the trees we had were salt cedar. There was a lot of greenery around the river, outside of town, in those days. Lots of shrubbery, and it was quite wide away from the river.

Birds used to live in the marshy areas where Sunland Park is now. Migrating birds stopped by. We should save these marshes for the birds.

In June and July, that's when we get the most rain around here. You should have seen the trees rolling down the river. The flooding would uproot them and so you would see these trees floating down the river.

I remember one time we saw a beaver in the river. Where it came from, I don't know. The river had flooded and maybe it got washed down here.

When I look at the [river] today its terrible. It's very narrow...its very small. Its not much of a Rio Grande anymore, not what I grew up with.



Demetrio “Jim” Maldonado El Paso

Demetrio Maldonado was born in 1924 in Colorado and moved to El Paso when he was five years old. His family lived in the old Fort Bliss area of El Paso. His father worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). His story contains three themes repeated by many of our interviewees: fond memories of a youth spent swimming and fishing down at the river, respect for the fearsome power of the river in flood, and a lament for what the river has become today.

“The most beautiful place to go”



Molly Gamboa-Barth Mesilla

Molly-Gamboa Barth was born on the Mesilla Plaza in 1940. Her father was from Mexico and her mother was a Mescalero Apache. Like many others, she remembers the river as an important gathering place where people would go on weekends with their friends and families to have picnics and socialize. The shady cottonwood trees that once graced the river's banks were irresistible to town-dwellers seeking relief from the summer heat. Ms. Barth eloquently voices the sense of loss and regret expressed by many people who remember a river that is very different from the one that exists today. As she says, “how can you miss something that you didn't experience?”

In the summer times, what I remember best, we'd get into the car, with my two sisters, and we'd head down to the river, and it was the most beautiful place to go. At that time there were a lot of big old cottonwood trees, just like they have along the river in Albuquerque. On the west side of the river there were big areas of grass next to the cottonwoods, so it was perfect for picnicking. You could go on any given weekend, in the summer when the weather started to permit, and there would be virtually hundreds of people out there with their cars and families, very family oriented.

And a lot of the kids when they were junior high, high school age, they would go there and play, mostly swimming. Mostly though, it was husband and wives, grandpa and grandmas, and lots of little kids running around all over the place. When I was in high school, a lot of the kids would meet at the river and bring cokes and pepsi and beer and just have a good old time. Then little by little people got interested in other forms of recreation.

I heard that the reason these big old cottonwoods were destroyed was because they were sucking up the water, and using too much of the water supply needed for farming. Now, to me, that sounds awfully stupid, to get rid of such beautiful old trees, but that's what I was told. Those cottonwoods were humongous, old trees. They had to be 60 to 70 years old to be that size. It was amazing.

So now you go over to the dam and the river in that area, and there are no trees, lots of trash, no grass. It's just been neglected. And for someone who has such beautiful memories of what it used to look like, it's just a shame to see what it looks like now. It's sad because a lot of the people who are old timers

in Las Cruces and Mesilla remember what it used to be, and it's no longer like that.

When I see the comparison of Albuquerque to here, there's just no excuse why this area can't look like that. There are some people who are aware of this, the environmental organizations, and they've got the ball rolling. I know I'm not going to see it, my generation, but maybe our children can grow up and go down to that part of the Mesilla Valley and see it beautiful again. It could be so much more beautiful.

Just like the culture here in Old Mesilla, we don't want to let go of it. And I think a lot of times it brings sadness to all these people that the river is not what it used to be. At the river there didn't need to be a reason for a fiesta, if there was a weekend. Let's get the kids, let's get the guitars and let's get our friends and have a good time--that's what I remember about the river. It is something that has been gone for so long. How can you miss something that you didn't experience?

When we went out to party and picnic everyone would take their little fishing pole. When you weren't sitting around eating and telling jokes or playing the guitar, you'd be sitting at the banks of the river with your fishing pole. Now I don't see it anymore, but in those days people fished all the time.

How my sister found out that they were good to eat I'll never know, but we went fishing for crawdads all the time...We would take little chunks of liver and put them on a hook, on a string, and on a pole, and we would sit there by the river and dunk them in. In a minute or two there would be a pull.



“So many trails to walk on”

We knew we got the irrigation water from the river. To us, that was our life. There were a lot of people who depended on the river for doing their laundry. They depended on the river for even their drinking water. Of course you didn't see any wells like you see today. I never remember anyone getting sick because of the water.

The river was a swimming pool. Everybody used to bathe in the river. I guess that was our life, the river.

There used to be this place, across the river. There were five of us kids. You would go up the river, about 400 yards, and you would swim across the river and try to land in the right spot.

The river was wider than it is now, I'm going to say twice as wide. For one thing, it doesn't rain like it used to. Another thing, now they have dams all over the place, on both sides of the river...on the arroyos. And then, they didn't shut off the water like they do now. The water was always running.

There were birds there like you wouldn't believe it. I mean all over the place. Can you imagine? There was bosque all down the valley.

Every season, the river grew when it started raining. The arroyos in both directions, from La Mesa all the way to T or C, they all washed into the river and that's why it was so wide. That river was everywhere it could go. There was water all over the place. There was always the main [channel], but the river was over there and the river was over here.

There were big trees, logs, you'd see roosters, hogs--all floating down the river, some alive, some

dead. The river was something. It was scary. When the rainy season would come you knew you would have to do something to get out of the way. It [flood water] use to sound so terrible out there, you know like a train, or like the ocean. Man let me tell you, big ol' mesquites going down.

On both sides of the road from Canutillo down to El Paso, there are still signs of the swamps there. When the water was clear, you could sit on the banks and see the fish in the pools.

That's what the river use to look like. It's not anything like it used to be. To me, that's what's changed the most, the vegetation and all the wildlife that was there. If you fell down in the dumps or something, there were so many trails to walk on...the birds and this and that, you'd start to forget it.

It wouldn't have cost them a thing to go ahead and leave a couple areas as a refuge. In Canutillo that would have been a good spot because of the frogs and tornillo. If they would have left five acres on this side and five acres on that side for the animals. Where can they go?

The river used to be popular for picnicking for Easters, not too long ago. Can you do that anymore? They even cut down the cottonwoods that we would use for shade.

The river has changed from a river to a creek. I don't know how it can change any more. It's shrunk just about as much as it can. I don't know what else they can take from it.

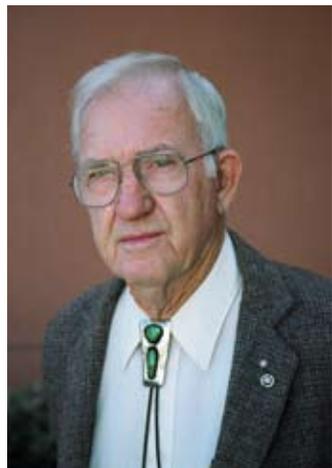


Isaac Melendrez La Mesa

Isaac Melendrez was born in 1934 in La Mesa, NM. The river was his life, he remembers, a place to go swimming or lose one's thoughts wandering through the bosque--the riverine forest that once provided habitat for countless birds along the Rio Grande. His vivid description of the sound of the river's flood waters--like a "train" or the "ocean"--suggests how terrifying the river could be at times. Yet like many others who witnessed firsthand the fearsome power of the river, he laments the changes he's seen in his lifetime and wonders why the loss of natural habitats had to be so complete.



Fishing for eels



Leroy Lozier
Las Cruces

An electrician by trade and lifelong resident of Las Cruces, Leroy Lozier was born in 1929 in the Don Bernardo Hotel, owned by his grandfather. His father's farm along the Rio Grande was condemned and flooded in the 1930s to make Caballo Reservoir. Blessed with a naturalist's eye, his detailed memories are an invaluable source of information about the plants and animals once found along the river, the river's appearance and behavior, and the changes to the river that he witnessed during his lifetime. Like others acquainted firsthand with the those changes, he laments what was lost and wishes for more balance between the needs of humans and nature in the way the river is managed today.

My fondest memory is the great times we had fishing and swimming in the river, and just picnicking. The entire family used to spend our Saturdays and Sundays on the river. From Shalem Colony down to Mesilla Dam, that was the main place where we hung out. Generally [the river] was just a nice place to go in those days. It was quite different from what it is now.

When I got old enough to go by myself I used to ride my bicycle out to my favorite spot. Every weekend I'd go and catch fish. Carp, bass, bluegill, sun perch and a few ring perch. Two kinds of catfish: blue cat and mud cats. They were all good to eat. I remember talking to people who caught sturgeon, but I never saw any.

The fish were in the big holes the river would make. You'd get to know where the good spots were and where the fish hung out. In certain places there would be deep pools that would be ideal to swim in.

We caught all sorts of fish, and softshell turtles. Some of them were nearly 30 inches across and they were quite a delicacy. They were a nuisance when you were trying to fish because they would steal your bait, but every once in a while we would catch one and then he was turtle soup.

We used to catch eels in the river and the Del Rio drain and eat them. They'd go after the bait, get hooked, then get tangled up in the line. They were quite strong, so they'd make quite a mess. They were two feet long or longer. This was in the late 30s, early 40s.

We also caught many, many crayfish, which we used for food and for catfish bait. We caught

them with tumbleweeds. We'd tie on a half-dozen strips of beef, put a weight on the stem, hook a line onto that, drop the tumbleweed in, leave it for a couple of hours, then pull it out with great speed. The outlets of the [irrigation] drains were the best places for crayfish.

There were cattails, willows. I can remember people that came through this part of the country during the depression of the thirties and a lot of those people lived in tents down in that area, and a lot of them would cut the willow trees and make furniture out of it, which they would bring into town and sell. And when they got enough money together they would move on to California.

There were also the mesquite trees, what they call the tornillo mesquite, with the screwbeans on it, and of course that's what the wild animals would like. There were islands out in the middle, and there were cottonwood trees out on them. Then the river changed and the silt would come in and it wouldn't be an island anymore. It would just be a neck of land sticking out, and with every flood it would change a little bit.

We saw a lot of wildlife: raccoons, badgers and many types of birds--ducks, geese, kingfishers, scaled quail and Gambel's quail. There were many, many of those, down by the river where they could hide from predators. And there were pheasants along the river too. We had millions of blackbirds--red-winged blackbirds, and blackbirds with yellow on their wings. They were the insect control specialists before the insecticides came along. When they destroyed the habitat, the birds left.

All the birds that used to migrate here are now gone. I can remember seeing a lot of different sorts

of cranes, white cranes. Some freshwater pelicans used to hang out on the river. You would see these large white cranes--a lot of them were here.

I used to see coatimundis in the Selden Mountains. Kangaroo rats and ground squirrels were up above the area where the river flooded. We occasionally saw opossums.

Before they built Caballo [Dam], there was marshland all the time, because the runoff from the Black Range and the other place where water ran year-round. But after they built Caballo, the year-round flow stopped, with exception to what comes down from Las Uvas and the other foothills between here and Caballo.

Not often did we see the river running too much like hot chocolate. Most of the time before and after the summer rains, it would be quite blue and quite clear. Sometimes the river was clean enough to drink. A lot of the water came down in those days from the Black Range and some from the San Andres Mountains, but generally speaking the water was always good to swim in. We could see as time went by it got worse and worse.

Well, I had seen it flooding. My first recollection, I was out there planning on going fishing, and I got out there, and there was no place to fish. It was just one big pond of water, maybe a thousand feet wide. It was just moseying along--it wasn't real fast. And then during the straightening process, when they were developing a channel, I had seen the river almost to the top of the levees on both sides. They had to open the flood gates on Mesilla Dam or it would be washed away.

The river was just a meandering 'S' and it was probably, I'd say from one side to the other it would be, maybe, a thousand feet, six hundred feet. The channel would change all the time because of the

flooding. All along the edge where the river made its 'S', natural pools would form.

Of course, all of that changed when the levees were put in. It took about ten years, fifteen, for the work that the Bureau of Reclamation did, along with the Boundary Commission. They strung large cables and set out the new channel where they wanted the river to come. As the river would flood, the old trees and stuff would catch on the cables and nets they put there. Eventually they straightened out the river and it left a channel. It was quite interesting but it was kind of a heartbreaker to see the old fishing holes be gone and the places where we used to love to swim. We saw it all go just a little bit at a time. Interesting, though, was the Bureau of Reclamation, or the U.S. government, put out bids for cables, to use to straighten the river, and those cables came from buildings in New York City, from elevator cables.

When they [straightend] the river they took away the habitat for the ducks and all of the cattails and reeds that were there. All of that went by the wayside. It's heartbreaking to me to see what has happened to the river. It could not have been done differently, but in those days there was no concern for the environment.

I would like to see some balance between nature and the human use [of the river] for agriculture. I think it could be restored. There used to be hundreds of cottonwood trees that grew along the river. Of course, they rooted them up and got rid of them and that got rid of the place for the hawks and eagles to roost and nest. I would like to see some of that balance restored.



Native Fish

Many people are surprised to hear that eels and sturgeon once swam in the Rio Grande. Several of our interviewees, like Leroy Lozier, spoke of catching and eating eels, and others recalled seeing or hearing about people catching sturgeon.

Both fish species are now gone from the Rio Grande in the Paso del Norte region.

Indeed, of the 26 kinds of native fish historically found in the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico and west Texas, only 12 can still be found today. The others fell victim to changes undergone by the river over the past century.

The construction of dams beginning with Elephant Butte in 1916 blocked the movement of fish up and downstream. This was the beginning of the end for eels, which need to return to the ocean to spawn.

The straightening of the river that resulted after the dams were built and after the Boundary Commission's "Canalization Project" was completed in the early 1940s eliminated backwater areas needed by many native fish.

The turning of the river on and off each year over the past half century in response to irrigation needs frequently left the river without enough water to keep big fish such as sturgeon (which can grow to 3 feet in length) alive during the winter months.

With modest changes in river management, it may be possible to restore many of these fascinating creatures that are part of the memories Leroy Lozier and others have of the Rio Grande.

A tragic flood



Lillian Cothorn
Las Cruces

Born in 1924, Lillian Cothorn was raised on the family farm along the Rio Grande near Radium Springs (NM). She tells her poignant story of a life filled with hardship and tragedy with remarkable stoicism. She and her siblings helped her mother raise cotton while their dad was away trapping. She married at age 16 and continued to live a farm and ranch life. Her children grew up as farm kids. She moved into Las Cruces after her husband was killed in a horse accident in 1976. Despite the terrible family loss she suffered at the hands of the river, she can still recall pleasant memories of marveling at turtle hatchlings while playing along the water's edge. Her story vividly frames the dual nature of the Rio Grande as a source of life and joy, as well as a force for destruction.

We were on the west side of the river, between the mountains and the river. Every summer the rattlesnakes would come down out of the hills to the river where it was cool. Every year we killed between 20 and 25 rattlesnakes as they were crossing our yard.

We played over at the river all the time. There were lots of beautiful, big cottonwood trees back away from the river. Then there was this low land before you got to the river, and I guess that's what they farmed.

The river used to have a lot of those big old soft-shelled turtles in it...I remember playing on a dike--we called it our sand hill. A turtle crawled out of the river, and she came up and dug this hole, and she laid her eggs, one on top of the other, these brown/white eggs. I don't know how much time it was later--we were just kids--and we happened to be playing on the sand. We'd forgotten about the turtles. These little turtles started hatching out of these eggs. They would crawl out of the sand and instinctively knew their way to the river. Although it was several feet from the river, they knew to go to the river. And one by one, there they would go. Just the cutest little things, tiny little things. That was quite an experience.

There were some open places, but there were also really thick places. There were always bobcats. Even a bear came down and got in the cornfield. It was in the summer time and my sister was down harvesting ears and she came back just as white as a sheet, blood running down her head. They weighed cotton on cotton scales, and the cotton scale was hanging on a tree or something by the cornfield. While she was gathering the corn, this

bear growled at her. It was eating corn, of course, but it scared her so bad that she ran under these scales and cut her head. That's why the blood was running down her face. But there were lots of coyotes and skunks, and badgers, and all sorts of things over there.

When they would turn off the water in the winter time, our milk cow would stray across the river because she could just walk across it. There would be sandbars, of course, and just a little water in it, so she could go right across.

The corral where we had the milk cow was quite a ways from the house. There was just this trail in the bosque going down to that. My sister and I had to milk that cow each day, so if we were late we had to come back through that trail and it was dark. I was scared to death because of the rattlesnakes. It was pretty dense. But it was a pretty place in there, lots of cottonwood trees. It was shady all the time. I don't think there are any trees over there now.

We used to see lots of ducks and cranes. The cranes would come into the fields that were being irrigated.

My dad was a government trapper. They would send them out on these ranches, wherever they needed animal control. They paid them between \$125-\$150 a month. That was during the depression, and that was a lot of money. We only saw him for two days out of each month.

On the first day of September, 1938, my dad had put a cable across the river so that we could come across and catch the school bus. On this day the river was at flood stage. In fact, I think it was go-

ing at the Leasburg dam, over the dam at 9000 [cubic] feet per second,* and big trees were rolling down the river.

This cable car of a thing had a box and it ran on a pulley. My mother, and my dad, and two of my sisters were on it. They had been on the opposite side of the river and my mother had taken the cage and gone over and picked them up. They'd gotten about to the middle. The rain had softened [the ground] up and allowed the poles that were holding it to cave in. I don't think the cable actually broke, but it let it sway into this roaring water and it started rolling with the water.

It wasn't a solid box they were in. It had spaces about [six inches] apart. My youngest sister got her foot stuck in one of those and it pulled her under. My mother was on there with her and she could not get her out. She could feel her with her feet, but she could not get her out. My dad and my oldest sister were thrown out into the water. My mother was the only one they saved. My dad and my two sisters were drowned. One of them was eleven and the other one was fifteen. I was fourteen. I was sick that day--that was the reason I wasn't out there.

They got my youngest sister out but she had been in this thing for three hours. There was nothing they could do. My mother was hanging on and a cowboy rode by and roped her. She had to turn loose and he pulled her through the water and got her out. And my dad, they found his body about three miles from where they went in. A man was out looking at his field and he just popped up. My oldest sister, they found her body at the old Mesilla Dam. They had shut the dams down as much as

they could, but you know with that much water, there is not much you can do. They buried all of them a week later on my oldest sister's sixteenth birthday.



Stealing cows on Christmas eve

Constance Hulbert El Paso

Constance Hulbert was born in Isleta, just downstream of El Paso, in 1921. Her parents were from the same mountain village in France and had met in Albuquerque at a church dance before moving to El Paso when her father got a job with the Southern Pacific. Her story reveals some interesting historical details about life along the Rio Grande during the days of revolution and Prohibition, before she was born. She also recalled her parents telling her that Pancho Villa kept a herd of a thousand horses behind her family's farm, and that exiled Mexican general Huerta lived in Isleta for six months until his death. Wanted on both sides of the border for killing President Madero and killing American miners, the story goes that Huerta disguised himself as an old woman until succumbing to appendicitis.

We didn't have swimming pools then and we would all go swimming in the Rio Grande. There was always someone who drowned but they would go anyway. Up where the smelter was, there was almost a beach.

The river was the lifeline for cotton which was the big thing here in the valley. In my childhood, it was all cotton, no pecans.

I remember when they straightened the river in the Ascarate area. That was all undeveloped, no houses, because every spring it flooded. There was no way to keep the river in its boundaries so it flooded. It just spread out. I can remember riding to town and the floodwaters were on both sides of the road.

There was no way to get across the river to get into Mexico and many people had relatives over there. In the winter time you just walked across because it would dry up, but in the spring and summer time it would fill up. So there were some people who had a ferry business, and then Alex came along and built the international bridge.

There is a move on to start a wilderness park. I'm sure you've heard of it in the Socorro area, Isleta to Socorro. That was a very interesting area during the prohibition area. It was like a jungle in there, lots of trees and vegetation. And when the river was dry, the rumrunners would bring the alcoholic beverages through there--the tequila, the sotol, whatever it might be--and would cross the river.

At that time they had a lot of banditry going on in Mexico. Now this is before I was born--we're talking about the days of World War I. And because

the border was not patrolled real well, they used to sneak across and steal livestock. My mother and father were going to start a dairy. They had gotten a loan from the State National Bank, and they had bought five valuable cows and a bull, so they could start a first class herd. On Christmas Eve--my mother always told this story, this was before I was born--we always went to midnight Mass, it was just part of life. And that night she went by herself to midnight Mass, and she said 'you know in the old country, you always gave the cows and animals extra hay on Christmas Eve,' but she said that that year she did not do it. She just went straight to Mass. It's just as well--they would have probably killed her. That's when they were stealing the cows.

So the next morning when my father got up to feed the cows, the cows were gone, the lock was broken, and so was the valuable bull. They had stolen him. And do you know my father was a tracker? He followed them from here to the river and into Mexico. He followed them all the way to Hacienda, and he went armed. He got up to the hacienda and they had an adobe wall around it. As he was walking around, there were the hides from his cows. They had already been slaughtered. He looked up right into the face of the Mexican guards with their machine guns, so he had no choice but to turn around and come home.



Family picnics

We used to go picnicking. Not only with our immediate family, but two or three families would go, and meet and spend a day. You took your balls and played games, and the mamas sat down and talked and the daddies talked over there, and the kids played together. Our big trip was to Mesilla Dam.

Especially in the summer, we would go and we would watch people swimming or fishing, having picnics. Whole families would go. There were a lot of trees. I remember these huge, beautiful trees. Families would go and spend the day. The men usually went fishing. Back then a lot of families didn't have indoor plumbing, so they would go swimming. That would be our way of cooling off in the summer.

There were a lot of trees. Somewhere along the way, somebody--I think the Reclamation Service--cut down all the trees. But there were a lot of trees, and we used to go and have picnics there, and park in the shade. Oh the cottonwood trees, they were humongous. They were all along the banks of the river. Some of them had their roots in the water. I remember there was so much shade. And butterflies, I remember butterflies, oh butterflies. And there were a lot of wildflowers.

I remember walking along the ditch bank to cut asparagus in the morning. It would be growing all over the place. Mama would send us early in the morning to cut it. Now the ditch banks are treated to kill weeds so you don't see that much asparagus. In fact, I don't see any.

Sometimes there would be some big trees in the water if there was a big storm up north or something. Oh the water was muddy looking. There were times when there would be islands in the river.

I remember when we were growing up we would go and get some water from the river, because supposedly it was softer water. You would let it settle down, and then you would heat it and wash your hair.

I can remember a flood. Some of the houses fell. People came and knocked on our door during the night to get my dad up to see if they could get some help. The river washed away the church in Mesilla. That's why the new church has so many steps, so that it wouldn't be washed away. We passed by the Amador Hotel [in Las Cruces] and people were in canoes and rafts. I am going to say this was sometime in the thirties.

The river was more natural then. It carried a lot of fish. And it had turtles. I know that some people ate turtles.



Pricilla Grijalva
Mesilla

Pricilla Grijalva was born in 1926 in Los Angeles. Her family moved to Mesilla when she was five years old. The house she was raised in still stands near La Posta Restaurant. She helped her father in the gas station and garage he opened on Highway 28. She recalls her grandmother helping to make bells for the church in Mesilla out of melted jewelry. One of her uncles was an engineer who helped build the dams at Elephant Butte and Mesilla. Her story contains a theme voiced by almost everybody we interviewed: namely, the Rio Grande was a place where families and friends used to go to have picnics under the shade of big trees now gone, swim, fish and escape the summer heat. Interestingly, she is also one of several interviewees who recall harvesting wild asparagus along the banks of the river and irrigation ditches.

A wild bounty for the kitchen

I have pretty good memories of when we were kids. We used to go to the river, all over the valley. It was very different than it is today. There was no contamination.

My grandfather would tell me stories about the Rio Bravo.¹ For instance, before the dams were built, floods would flood all the valley. And they would go over there and catch fish, and hunt geese and ducks, and things like that.

They had a lot of those big trees we call alamos [cottonwoods]. They were pretty good shade. We would stay underneath the trees and have our picnics. We would bring sandwiches, or sometimes we would barbeque some meat, and have lemonade. The whole family would go. We would go over there and swim. Very close to the shore, because my mother and father were looking after us.

My grandfather would go to the river to fish. There is one fish I would see when I would go to the river, but that fish, you are not able to find it now, it is very rare. It used to be called, in Spanish, 'pez de lagarto' because, you see, the mouth of this fish looks like a crocodile. 'Lagarto' means crocodile.² You don't see this now, here, or close to Juarez. They tell me you find these fish near Porvenir. The river is not so contaminated. They have springs there, and big fishes--bass and catfish.

And sometimes, when the water was running slow for a couple of days, it was clear and you could see the fishes through the water. In the morning and evenings we could see the big fishes jumping out of the water to catch the dragonflies. My father would catch some fish called 'mojarras'.³ He would lower a net down in the deeper parts with some

bait inside of it, and when the mojarras would get in there he would pull it up and get them. Those are a really tasty fish. They are not very easy to eat because they have a lot of those little bones.

Sometimes the turtles would get on the hooks, and then we would take them home and make stews, or turtle soup. Sometimes they would make a big barbeque out of it. They would prepare the meat inside of the shell. They would put herbs and condiments and cook it in a hole or in an oven. It would come out very soft and juicy. Here, close to Juarez, you don't see the turtles anymore, because you don't have water all year like it used to be, and the river dries up, and because of the contamination. Pollution is a big problem now in the river.

In the winter the river was kind of dry. The water level went down. In some parts of the river there remained some holes. Sometimes they would throw dynamite sticks in there, but that would kill everything. Before long, that was forbidden.

There were a lot of lakes on the side of the road [parallel to the river], close to Guadalupe and Tornillo. On the way with my grandfather we would see a lot of ponds and little lakes, and we would see a lot of geese, and cranes, and ducks. And other birds we call egrets. We would stop by the ponds, and we would take a shotgun and a .22. You could hunt birds like quail, and you could hunt rabbits, pheasant. There used to be a lot over there. Sometimes you would even see bigger animals. My mother and grandmother were pretty good at cooking the game.

Some of the ponds were closer to the river because when the river would flood, the water would re-

main in those ponds. So when they shut off the water in the river, the ponds would keep the water quite a bit, and the vegetation was quite thick. And there was a lot of grass, and trees like tornillo, which you don't see much anymore. Now all you see is creosote bush, and the cactus too...

Sometimes you would see little islands in the river. There was vegetation, and you would see the birds nesting. You would see the ducks nesting and the other water birds. There was a lot of diversity of birds on the water, and you would also find bullfrogs, but now you don't find them because of the contamination. You don't see those birds now, not close to Juarez.

You don't see them anymore because it doesn't rain anymore, and the river was canalized and the cemented into the big ditches. I don't know if the weather has changed quite a bit because of the pollution. When I was a kid it used to rain quite a bit, and it was more frequent, and big snows, it was colder those times. Nowadays the winters are much milder.

I don't remember when the river would flood, but I do remember when the river was not cemented, because I remember we used to go to the river and it was more spread out. I remember my grandfather used to tell me stories about when the river would flood. Once, near downtown Juarez, his grandfather used to have a house over there. At that time there were no banks to keep the money, so he had a trunk filled with gold and silver coins. The old man, he was mounted on top of the trunk, because he didn't want to abandon or leave it. They had to drag him out of the house. They had to tell him forget about the money.

The river is not the place it used to be. There is no vegetation. You don't find fishes anymore. The water is dirtier. You find sometimes a lot of fecal coliform. I remember when we were kids we used to swim near the shore of the river. Now we don't do it anymore. Some people risk it, but I have learned those people got skin infections because of the contamination in the water...

It is very different. It's kind of sad, you know. Now we don't have those beautiful places we used to over there. Now you go over to the river and you see trash.



¹Rio Bravo is the original Spanish name for the Rio Grande, still used in Mexico.

²Sr. Salmon may be referring to a longnose gar, another species of native fish which has a long, narrow snout full of teeth, like a crocodile.

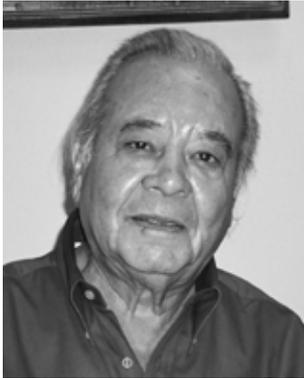
³If anybody knows the English name for this fish, we'd like to hear from you--(575) 522-5552.



Rolando Salmon Ciudad Juarez

Born in 1938, Rolando Salmon grew up in Ciudad Juarez, where he still lives and teaches. His story of catching fish, turtles, and other game suggests the abundant gifts of nature that the river once provided to people, and how quickly urbanization, pollution, and other changes that have taken place just in his lifetime have robbed us of that bounty today. He is one of several interviewees to recall catching and eating softshell turtles from the river. He also makes an interesting statement about it raining more when he was a kid.

“The river would come to us”



Chuy Romero El Paso

Chuy Romero was born in Chihuahua, but grew up in El Paso. Both his parents were from Mexico City. His family struggled through the lean years of the Depression. He recalls selling sodas out of an ice box when he was eight years old, while his father picked cotton because there were no jobs in town. There was only one telephone on the ten block street on which he grew up. Despite the hardships, everyone in his family eventually made it through college. His story suggests what an inviting place the wild environs of the river must have offered to a boy growing up in the city, especially one growing up in such tough times. It is easy to understand his disdain for what the river has become today.

In those days, the river ran right through downtown El Paso. When it was flowing it was about two hundred yards wide, and during the heavy rainy season when it used to flood, it would flood over into the south side of El Paso. We used to take advantage of those days. We used to sneak out there and swim. That was our swimming hole.

It was a wonderful experience to go wading in the river out there, on the whole south side of El Paso. On the Mexican side, there was a levee on the river, and they used to call it El Bordo, which means the border. They used to take us on a leisure walk from the center of Juarez all the way through the levee to the Isleta de Cordova, which is now Cordova Bridge. They call it that because there was a little island there, on which cotton was grown.

It was beautiful. We used to enjoy the river. It was just as dirty as it is now, but who cared? In those days, there was no other place where we could get out of the heat. I'm talking about the time when there were no swimming pools in El Paso, not on the southside where the poor people lived.

On the Mexican side, the levee was higher than on the American side, so when it flooded we used to get the flood because there was no border, nothing. The river used to flood over into the residential districts. But it was a lot of fun for us when we saw that river flooding. Instead of going to the river, the river would come to us, and we enjoyed it. It didn't happen too often but when it did it was a lot of fun.

We used to wait for the summer to come around so we could get out of school, and instead of going home, we could go to the river and take our shoes

off and pants off and swim in your shorts. There were no people around.

We've always admired the river. We also respected it. We never used to go into the middle of the river. You couldn't trust it and you couldn't tell which part of the river was level and which was not. We had our own safe places, and we knew exactly how far into the river we could go without being swept by the currents. For most of us, that was our only recreation place in El Paso. We didn't do it every day but we did it most of the days.

In those days we didn't know it, but without the Rio Grande there would have been no crops. People made a living out of the river. To us, it was just there. We were kids. Later on, you read up and found out exactly what the river meant to people. It's not just a boundary line. They even tell of during the Mexican revolution of 1910 people use to get up on the roofs to see the fighting on the Mexican side, the only thing that separated you was the river.

That's not a river nowadays, just a dribble of water they use for irrigation. To me it's not a river anymore. But in my day the river was a beautiful sight to see. I can just picture it in my mind. I'm talking seventy years ago and I still can imagine the river the way it used to be.



Floods and Catfish

Before they put the big dam in at Elephant Butte, the river changed its course from one side of the valley to the other. Every time it flooded, wherever the channel broke and went, that's where the river would flow next year. It would pile great huge piles of sand in the fields. There were big sand dunes and washed-out holes all across the valley. The farmers farmed around them until they could be leveled out.

1935 was a bad year for everyone. The flooding was so bad, the highway from Radium Springs into Las Cruces was underwater. There was terrific rain. The arroyo came down when the river was in flood stage. That arroyo jumped the river and came over onto all of the fields on that side of the canal. Friends had to wade through waist-deep water through the field to where we lived. By the time they got to our place, they had lost half their clothes and shoes. It was swift water. They were drenched and muddy as could be.

People lost everything--household goods, cows and chickens. Many of our friends lost everything, including their land, and had to move out. We were glad when they put it in [Caballo Dam].

Boys loved to swim in the river. I could not swim in it. I would get awful headaches. The doctor told me I was getting hypothermia and to stay out of the river. The river was so swift, it was a challenge for the men and boys to go swimming in the river to see who could swim across and back. The river channel was not deep, but it had a lot of deep holes, and whirlpools in the deep parts.

Mama would say, "Daddy, you better go catch fish," and Daddy would go catch some fish. He would dig a can of worms and go to the river to

fish whenever he had time. He always brought home a string of fish for us to eat. Sometimes in the cool evenings we would go to the river and set a trotline out, baited with chicken livers. He would wade out a ways and put a rock on the end of his line. The next morning he would have a big catfish on every hook. We would fry them in hot grease until brown. Were they good!

Sometimes he would go to the drainage ditch and would catch the big eels. Big old eels. We would dress them, put them in heavy salt water all night and then cook them like chicken. They were good. After they lowered the water table and cleaned the drainages out, you didn't find them anymore.

There were times when Daddy and I went down to the river, and took a fish seine and would make one swipe across the water and catch red horse minnows. They were real good bait for when we went fishing for perch, bluegills and other small pan fish. But his favorite was the medium-sized catfish. He would catch them and when he got enough, he would give a fish fry and invite the church people to have a picnic and help eat them.

When we first moved there were lots of catfish in the big holes, even in the winter. But after they straightened the river, the catfish didn't have the big holes to lay in over the winter. Daddy caught softshell turtles that came up the river. There are no big softshell turtles now, but there are some small ones.

I only know of one sturgeon being caught. One day, we were up at the Caballo Dam. There was a man that caught one of the sturgeons in there. He did not know what it was, it was so different than any other fish.



**Dorothy Christian Gage
Garfield**

Dorothy Christian Gage was born in 1917 in Carlsbad. Both her parents were from Texas. In 1926, her family bought a small farm in Garfield (NM), where she grew up about a quarter mile from the Rio Grande. Like many of her neighbors, her family lived in houses built of available materials--often adobe, with dirt floors and old cotton sacks as doors and windows. Her story really highlights the mixed feelings of many farming people towards the Rio Grande. On the one hand, the river was the source of the fertile valley soil and water that made farming possible. It also provided a natural bounty of fish and game to supplement larders, like the catfish and eels that Dorothy's father caught. On the other hand, the river's floods could wipe out farms and destroy lives in a matter of hours. Although her family welcomed the dams and levees that tamed the river, she also recognized the tradeoffs that resulted, e.g. the loss of habitat for catfish and eels, the disappearance of big turtles, etc.

“It used to be so beautiful”



Corrine Alvillar Mesilla

Corrine Alvillar was born in Mesilla, NM in 1926. Her dad was from Mesilla and her mom from Las Cruces. She knew how to make butter when she was ten years old. Like many of our interviewees, she remembers collecting wild asparagus that grew on the banks of the irrigation ditches. Her memories of the river are all positive, especially the big social gatherings of family and friends at places like the Mesilla Dam and Picacho Bridge--places that still draw a fair number of people on weekends.

Right in that area by our farm there were loads of cottonwood trees. It was like a beautiful little island there. That's where people used to go and have dances and parties. They used to ask my dad for permission. It was beautiful. The cottonwood trees were so huge. I guess my dad and everybody that lived near it cleared it so it would be nice. That's where everybody would go swimming and we just had a great time there. There were little islands near the edge and that's where we would splash around and play in the slower water.

There were lots of birds, and those cottonwoods. They were huge, not like those ones you see now days. Even when we moved out of Mesilla we would still get together and go picnicking under the cottonwood trees, but not in that area because they knocked down all the trees. There is not much left in that area where I grew up. It used to be so beautiful. It looks very bare now. They knocked down and got rid of all the mesquite and the other shrubbery that was along the river. In fact, all that area looks very lonely now.

It was beautiful there [by Mesilla Dam]. There were a lot of people there, just like a fiesta was going on. [The Picacho Bridge] was another area where people would go, another area of big cottonwood trees. It seemed like the whole town would show up.

Along the drainage, there were some marshes and little lakes. You would see a lot of bamboo growing and stuff like that. There were always a lot of people hunting ducks. There were a lot of them in the drainage and along the river.

That levee that they built has changed it a lot. They

cleared the banks. They changed it so much, it doesn't look the same at all. It used to be so beautiful. I remember we used to go there on Easter, and the Fourth of July, and there were a lot of people there. There were always a lot of people at the river and you don't see much of that anymore. On any holiday there was always a lot of people. All of us kids always had a good time out there.

It seems like everyone was very particular about picking up trash in those days. People didn't treat the river like they do now, just trashing it and stuff. We would all pack our trash and take it back in.



Muskrat coats for mom

I used to go down to the Rio Grande and gather clay from the banks. I would make dishes and food out of that clay and set them on the foundation of the house and they would dry in the sun. I'd also make little dolls.

We would pick algerita berries, tiny little yellow ones. As soon as those berries ripened, us kids would go and eat them right off the trees. Nothing's there now.

We didn't go for picnics at the river. There was more picnicking up the valley. Sometimes we would go up there because there were trees alongside the river and grassy land. It wasn't like that down here. There were big bushes, higher than me.

My brother fished a lot in the river, and my dad and mother did as well. They had a place down by Fabens and it was called The Box, and when daddy was going to The Box we knew we were going to have fish. We would eat the crawdads in there. We would catch them and eat them. We would use an old pan and draw them up.

The only time we got to use [the river] as a swimming pool, was when they weren't irrigating the farms and it would get real low and there would be little islands and things. Otherwise my parents wouldn't let me go down there, because it was pretty big and it wasn't controlled like it is now. At times it was real big, especially when it was flooded. I mean, it hit our house and our house was about half a mile from the river. After that [1927 flood] they built something to keep the river from doing that again.

Every now and then there would be a cottonwood tree by the river. The trees gave off this seed, and you would see it floating all over in the air. If it was a calm day, they would float down, and the next day the ground would be white.

All the way down Alameda Street to Ascarate there were cottonwood trees and they would form a tunnel over the roadway. When they started getting a lot of Model T's and Model A's, people started running into them and getting killed, so they cut them all down.

There were cattails growing [along the river] and we would pick those when they were green and decorate them, and use them in the house.

There were rabbits, and muskrats, and snakes, birds--lots and lots of birds. There were ducks--my brothers hunted them. You would see 10 or 15 of them at a time. The muskrats he got for a coat for my mother. He would skin them and then nail them to boards to let them dry, and then they put oil on them to keep them soft. He made two muskrat coats for her.

Dad had a cotton farm in Hatch. He planted corn for the pigs, and it was during the big drought in the Thirties, and there was no rain. We had to walk a mile to the pipeline and carry back buckets of water to drink and to use. All of us kids had jobs to do, you had to go carry water. The government paid him a dollar a pig to shoot them and bury them.

We would go to California a lot, because my mother's family was from there. You would mention the Rio Grande and they all knew what it was.



Jane Horst
El Paso

Jane Horst was born in 1922 in El Paso, TX, where she grew up a half mile from the Rio Grande. Her family owned a cotton farm in Hatch which they lost during the Depression. Her girlhood memories--of digging clay on the river's banks to make toys, of her brother trapping muskrats to make coats for their mom, etc.--highlight the great variety and personal nature of people's experiences with the river. Many of those same experiences would be impossible to have today due because the river has changed so much.



Taking the river for granted



Armando Camanez Ciudad Juarez

Born in Mexico City, Armando Camanez moved to Juarez when he was young, where he grew up half a block from the river. Like many long-time residents, he remembers enjoying picnics at the river and the abundant bird life. And like others who enjoyed these pursuits, he understands the reason of for the changes that were made to the river, but wonders if we didn't go too far in "taking the river for granted." Interestingly, the big trees he remembers floating down the river eventually came to rest and became an important part of the underwater habitat for fish and other aquatic creatures. As the trees along the banks have disappeared, so too have these underwater snags.

We used to see the river just about every day, the way it used to be. The old river, as I remember it when we came to this part of the country, was very wide and there was a lot of movement in the water. It is what I consider a real river.

On the banks of the river there were a lot of trees. There was a lot of grass, tall grass...[There was] a lot more water, and the current was very strong. It was very dangerous. Nobody tried to swim in it. People would swim in other parts of river that weren't dangerous. The banks were steep near downtown. There were more beaches towards the valley. In the upper valley, up in the U.S. where the river curved, it was a lot wider.

I remember it was deep. In some parts you couldn't touch the bottom; other parts it was shallow, and you could. There were times when the water level would go down. That is about the time when they were building the dams.

There were a lot of birds around, a lot of hunting. There were a good variety of birds.

There were big trees, yes. In some parts, at some times of the year. I can remember seeing the river coming down so strong that it would actually pull trees out of the bank, it was that strong. It was very interesting to see.

We would mostly go picnicking with friends. There weren't a lot of activities back then, not really a whole lot of places to go, so we would just go far away, as far away as we could from the city. Lot of families used to do that, especially on the Mexican side. There were hardly any parks back then, so people would go along the river. Mostly

on Sundays and days like that. They don't do that along the border anymore.

I'm thinking about some things we have around here that we just take for granted. The river used to be very interesting. A lot of people talked about the river being so huge and the river being so strong that it would pull trees out with their roots. You would see trees floating on the river. People from the area always talk about it. There was a certain pride about it. Now the river is just an irrigation source.

Sometimes we try and fight nature in a way that we might be destroying some things. I think nature is there for some reason and you have to respect that. But we're changing the rivers. We're trying to control the effect of the water, but at the same time we really don't take good care of our water. I think this is one area in which they should pay attention because this is a natural source of water. We have to be careful how we use it.



55-pound catfish

The river's just like any other river in the world. The high sediment load leads to a wandering river channel, and that's what led to the rechannelization. After they did that, there was very little water coming down this far in the valley. It was all being used for crops up north. Many of the farmers moved out, up to the Pecos region. We're talking about the fifties. Only the larger, and so-called richer, farmers stayed around here. Those that had the money, those are the ones that stayed. But most of them moved somewhere else.

We do have a little more water in it now, compared to the fifties. I also recall that in the early fifties it was quite a fishing spot. Just about anywhere along the river, you just walked in and you would bring a catfish out. There were deeper pools. Mostly below the little diversion dams.

People would fish up and downstream from that little dam. I've seen 55-pound catfish coming out of there, and I've heard of larger size fish coming out of there. There were carp. Most people didn't like them because they had a lot of bones on them. The catfish were real good. We ate a lot of them. I've seen a fish fit around a number three wash tub one-and-a-half times. I've heard of people who have seen gar come out of the canals around here but personally I haven't seen them.

There is a place on the river downstream from here called Little Box Canyon. Before the rechannelization of the river, that area had a natural dam in it and a big deep pool, I understand there were a lot of large catfish caught out of there. That was the best fishing spot around. But the dam was taken out by the boundary commission when they did this rechannelization. It made a lot of people mad too.

There were also a lot of mule deer and mountain lions. Every once in a while we would run across a badger while we were hunting rabbits.

We used to come down here on weekends for picnics. We would spend the whole time in the river swimming. Back then it was muddy but it wasn't polluted.

When we wanted to go swimming we would go down to a swimming hole, but we didn't go near the diversion dams because the water was too swift and dangerous. We'd go and find us a nice slow section on the inside of a curve in the river. We used to come down here on weekends for picnics and we would spend the whole time in the river swimming. Back then it was muddy but it wasn't polluted.

The arroyos now don't run that much anymore, not like they used to. I lived a quarter mile from a big arroyo and when that thing run it sounded like a freight train. When the river flooded, it would go over its channel but not over these levees.

There used to be a lot of cottonwoods on the river, and all around the valley. Highway 80 used to have a lot of cottonwoods. There were a lot of marshes at one time. All of these low areas around the river use to classify as a marsh.



James Irby Fort Hancock

James Irby was born in McNary, four miles from Ft. Hancock, TX in 1940. After serving in the Marines for 22 years, he returned to Fort Hancock and has become quite a local history buff. James accurately recalls the flora and fauna around the Rio Grande during the time of his youth. He is our most downstream interviewee. His recollections are matter of fact and without sentimentality, but still provide a glimpse of the incredible natural bounty the river once provided. One would be hard pressed to find a 55 pound catfish in the river today. He echoes the words of another interviewee (Ochoa Cunningham) in his description of the canyons below El Paso as a place to find big fish.



Nelson Clayshulte Mesilla

Nelson Clayshulte, a Mesilla pecan grower, is a real treasure of historical information about farming and the river in the Mesilla Valley. Born 1917 in Tuscon, he grew up in a two-story adobe house. His family raised bees, and he recalls accompanying his father on his trips up and down the valley to tend to their hives. His story reveals what a dicey proposition farming was before the modern irrigation and flood control dams were built. He remembers how crops had to be grown early in the season before the log dams that were used to divert water from the river for irrigation washed out in spring floods. His story reveals some interesting detail about how the river would carve new channels during high flows, and how the old channels formed low spots that held water and supported wetlands. These alternate channels and wetlands provided important habitat for fish, and have are virtually gone today. Not surprisingly for a farmer, he views the changes to the river that he has witnessed during his lifetime as generally positive, but his vivid stories describe a wilder Rio Grande that few people alive today have been fortunate enough to have experienced.

Flooding the skunks out

We've been in agriculture our whole lives. Father was in bees, and now we're in pecans. The early years was mostly grains. They did have vineyards and fruit trees.

When I was a little kid, right here down the road [in Mesilla], that stayed in tules and cattails most of the year. The water was stopped up, kind of a stagnant pond during the irrigation season, then it would dry up in the slack months. Then when they started irrigating it would fill up. It was the old watercourse. The river meandered all over the valley.

We had trees growing all over the valley, mostly cottonwoods and willows, screwbean mesquites. You'd have to fight your way to go through, most places. Some places animals had made a trail.

There were still a lot of bosques when I was a small kid, scattered around the valley, but, after the first World War they started cleaning it up. They started to get mechanical things to help out. The last of it's been since the second World War. When they finally got it, there was just a patch or two of it left. There used to be one up here by this side of Shalem Colony, but it burned up just two or three years ago. There's a little patch of it along the highway going up to Radium Springs. Then as soon as you cross the river, the bridge by Radium Springs, between there and that bar, that used to be all bosque.

When I was small, this bridge right here [Calle del Norte bridge in Mesilla] wasn't in. The river used to be divided down there. When we were kids we would go down there and swim. One side had a shallow channel, and we'd go and swim in that

instead of the deep one on the other side. There was an island in the middle that was at least a half mile long. In the summer we went once everyday, because we worked in harvesting grain. That was our bath.

We fished with a pitchfork in the drain canals. All these drain canals that are dry now ran water. Lots of tules, cattails, lots of black birds. We'd go wading down the canal with the pitch fork and every once in a while there was a catfish, but mostly it was carp. They're bony as can be.

Most of the drains went to the river. We had beavers and beaver dams in it. They even built beaver dams in the river, at one point. You had a lot of skunks in there, and rabbits and various birds, lots of blackbirds. We had doves in there. We had ducks and stuff, so we always had our shotguns with us when we were working bees in case you saw some. A lot of ducks, all up and down the river. Today you don't see many ducks at all.

Bees need water too. There was more water available then than there is now, because there was more stagnant water around. Now everything is moved or drained right away. You don't find ponds sitting around.

They built these levees down here in the late thirties. They straightened the river up, took a few little kinks out of it. But when we were kids, when there were floods, all the arroyos all the way up to Socorro would fill up and empty into the river.

We had one of only three phones in town. When there were floods, the Reclamation Service would call my dad. He was one of many people all up and

down the valley that they would call, and he would go down to the river and tell the people who had homes along the river that there was a flood that would be here in so many hours.

All along the back of Snow Ranch, all along what now is Stahmann Farms, that was all bosque. Mr. Snow, his land got flooded a lot. People had these houses built out of cottonwood logs. Those would wash out. I've seen all of that before they put the levees in.

It would flood about knee-deep in water. It would wash all the skunks out. There were prairie dog mounds that were about four feet high, and all the skunks would get on there until the water would go down. The water was in the trees. It would fill up back in there. It wasn't very fast. There wasn't much current. It wasn't a big rush of water. The banks were more or less like they are now, but right up against it was trees. Banks varied in height above river, usually one to two feet, sometimes three to four.

When we had a flood, that's what would take the kinks out. It would wash two or three trees out and they would fall in there and that starts the water being diverted a bit and downstream the same thing would happen, and that's how you got your zig-zagging in the river. Trees were right up to the bank, and when there was a big flood there was tree's going right down the river. They would pile up somewhere and then start clogging it up, and the water would rush out, and that's how they began.

There were different areas that had split channels. They got beat up in the floods. Where it would split, one side would run deeper. Before they leveled, some places would be over water and some places would be underwater. It could wash some things out pretty good. I've seen it come down a

few times.

The flood areas were much wider than what the levees are now. Sometimes it was really flat. Floods would come through, and if it was big enough it would take some of the kinks out of it.

In these canals and down by the river, there used to be all these dead animals flowing down after a big flood. Probably more farm animals than wild.

During the flood of 1935 I woke up and my model T was sitting in the water and my house was sitting in the water. I rubbed my eyes three or four times and it was still water. The gang from the dairy came down and lifted my car up, and I got out of there.

Mesilla is an old Indian campground, and we're a high piece of land, so when it flooded the water was either on one side of the town or another, so this was always high land.

You didn't find as clean of a channel as you do now. The trees have been taken away inside the levees. I don't know why they took them away, but they did. They could have left them, I think, and still have your water run much like it did. People want to put a bosque back. I don't know. I would have let any trees come that get started but they keep them mowed off now. That's been done since the mid-thirties.



“A boy’s world”

The river intrigued me ever since I first attended Jesus and Mary High School at the end of Yandell. All of the boys use to sneak down to the river and go fishing.

There was a big flood around that time. The water got all the way up to the Sacred Heart Church, which was about three feet above street level. This was in the spring time, when the snow melts and the river is fast and furious.

I remember hearing about the Caballo Dam. I went and saw it and I remember I was quite disappointed. It was machinery moving dirt from the surrounding hills and practically closing the river with a dirt wall.

The water was more suitable for swimming on the Mexican side. You see, there was a beach. On the American side around the smelter, the bank was high. The water was clean, but you couldn't see the fish because it has always carried a lot of silt. Around the smelter, the river was very large, very wide.

There was a considerable amount of bosque, mostly plumario. The bosque was down by Fabens, on both sides of the river. Down there was an island, several blocks long and wide. Around Isleta, small islands were very common in the river.

The bosques had game. When I was ten years old, my mother allowed me to go the dry goods store and buy a single shot, Remington .22 rifle. There were very few people so we could fish, we could hunt, rabbits and rattlesnakes if we had to. The bosque was better around smelter town and white spur. Just imagine you're on main street, on

Highway 80 south, and one block south there was bosque. We would go fish, and we would go hunt, and we'd have imaginary adventure. We felt safer hunting around the river. It was a boy's world.

Some boys preferred to go fish around the islands. There were a large number of small islands...Otherwise, they preferred to fish in the curve where the outer side would be deeper. They were deep enough to cover a grown man. Fishing was a lot of fun. You could go and spend all day. You could spend half a day and catch two or three fish.

Sometimes, people down by Fabens would catch a fish that had a mouth that looked like an alligator. [shown sturgeon drawing] Yes, Yes, Yes something like this. That's right. Occasionally--those were rare. We caught one and we opened up its mouth. Catanes, is what a high school teacher told me.



J.R. Provencio El Paso

J.R. Provencio was born in El Paso in 1925. His family made frequent trips between El Paso and Fabens to check on a gas station they owned, giving him the opportunity to travel up and down the valley regularly. His story suggests a Rio Grande that is scarcely imaginable today--a place where boys could sneak away to swim, fish, hunt and have “imaginary” adventures right on the edge of the heart of El Paso.

Filling sandbags

My first memories that I have of the river is that it had a lot of running water. In 1925, the river had flooded up to Alameda Street in El Paso. In Mexico at that time we did not have levees defending us from the river. I remember my father took me to the bridge on Avenida Lerdo where he and neighbors were working to fill sand bags to make a berm, to prevent the river from flooding homes on Avenida Chapultepec. Afterwards, in 1926, a defensive border was constructed on the Mexican side. When I was young, everytime I heard the river was rising I would travel on my bike along the berm to see it.

In September of 1958, I saw a great swelling of the river where the river flooded in the Anapra zone in New Mexico, where the electrical plant was located. They dispatched troops from Ft. Bliss to defend the borders from flooding. I took a photo where the river has almost reached the lower part of the bridge, where Avenida Juarez joined with Santa Fe street in El Paso. It was said that if the river had kept rising, it would have been necessary to dynamite the bridge so that it would not block the river and flood our cities.

The river used to have a series of meanders that would hold standing water. When Onate first reached the river, he described it as a marshy (pantanos) river. Because of this, they had to travel along the edge until they found a place to cross. They were able to cross upriver near the diversion dam for the acequia madre is located today. They were able to cross there thanks to the existence of an area of rocks that can still be seen where UTEP is located.

When I was young, we would swim in the river. During the summer months when the gates at

Elephant Butte would close, there would be no water in the river. We would play baseball in the dry riverbed.

[shown drawing of sturgeon] I have not caught one, but I have seen and know friends that have talked about capturing one. I have seen one because, some time ago, I did a project for a federal office to restore an historical site and build a monument where the revolutionary army led by Pascual Orozco and Francisco Villa camped in a place where Francisco Madero was living.



Francisco Oscar Ochoa Cunningham Ciudad Juarez

Francisco Ochoa Cunningham grew up and spent nearly his entire life in Ciudad Juarez. His story suggests the extremes of flows that once characterized the river. One day he was playing baseball in a dry river bed, the next he was helping his father fill sandbags to protect the city against flooding.

You needed a horse to cross it

I always enjoyed fishing in the river. There was a canal running by my dad's farm, so my mother took us out when I was about three years old and taught us to swim in the canal. When I was raising my kids I taught them to swim in Caballo. I took my children here to fish at Mesilla Dam and at Radium Springs.

We hunted ducks up above Radium Springs. There weren't many houses up in there then. When they shut the irrigation off, that would form little pools and that's where the ducks would be. I think there are less ducks now than there were then.

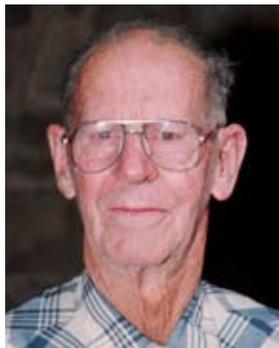
When we lived at Brazito, from 1940 to 1944, our irrigation water usually came down at night. I would go out and get the water started down some rows; then I would walk to the other end of the rows and lay down and go to sleep. When the water reached my feet, I would get up and get the water started in the next rows.

I've always been kidded about the Rio Grande, especially when I was in the Navy. They would say 'What does Rio Grande mean?' and I would say 'Big River.' Some of them who had passed through New Mexico would say its nothing but a dry river bed. Of course, I took quite a bit of kidding about that.

When we first got married we'd go down to the river bank and you could get all the asparagus you wanted. There were cottonwood trees. I remember there was a lot more cottonwood trees when I lived on the farms, when I was real little, four and five years old. A lot of my dad's farms were along the old river, and those trees were still there for a while.

My dad told me that there were swamps here, and sand dunes here, all up and down the river. During flood stages, if he wanted to cross the river he would get his horse started and hold onto its tail.

The old river bed seems to have been much deeper. There were cattails and reeds in the channel. Really, if I had my way, I would like to see it like it originally was, winding down through here, but there's no way it can go back here in Mesilla Park.



Ralph Emerson Mesilla Park

Ralph Emerson lives in Mesilla Park, in a historic rock house that his father built. After returning from World War One, his father went to school at NMSU and acquired a farm in Dona Ana. After losing that and other farms during the Depression, the family moved around in search of work, eventually returning to the Mesilla Valley. After graduating from NMSU, Ralph took a job with the telephone company where he worked for forty years. He experience of being teased by out-of-towners over the usual appearance of the "mighty" Rio Grande is certainly one that is familiar to many residents.

Bosques

We used to go out to Mesilla Dam where this marsh was and we would have picnics there. It was quite a popular place. They initially built picnic tables and turned it into a park. That was before the river had any levees.

There used to be patches of bosque all over the valley--saltcedar primarily, cottonwoods and other things. A lot of grass, not Bermuda, but a fast growing type grass, about 14-18 inches tall. There was lots of wild asparagus all over the place. There were a lot of wildflowers. Lots of tornillo, quail, pheasants, skunks, squirrels, birds, owls, chicken hawks. Nothing like a jungle by any means. You wouldn't need a machete to cut your way in, but there were paths you had to stick to, because of the thorns and brush. It was mostly along the river, and along the old river beds.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, those bosques extended all the way into the city limits. One area is in the North Alameda area, and in the Parker area. It's one place that is the same as it used to be 50-60 years ago. One was down by Mesilla Park, between there and the college. That was all bosque. It was wide.

Even after 1914, whenever they had a big rain the river would overflow because they didn't have any dikes, or levees--just the river bed. As you can imagine, a river running through a fairly flat valley, it meanders quite a bit. And if you ever have a fairly heavy rain it will tend to straighten it out quite a bit. It ran out of its banks many times.

There was a [Reclamation Service] shop here in Cruces, and my dad was head of the shop, from 1921 until he died in 1924. They used a lot of

steam shovels for cleaning out the river and keeping it in a straight route.

The old river beds still looked like a delta. You would still have the river running, but right next to it you would have an artery that was full of water but wasn't running. But in '38 or '39, they brought the Boundary Commission to town...They had the task of building the levees all the way up to Elephant Butte.

They dug holes along the river bed, used the dirt for levees. The holes would fill with clear, cold water and made wonderful swimming holes. That lasted until 1942. We had enough time to build swings, diving boards, go out and put sand bags on them, and go out and move them from one pond to another.



Archie Beckett Las Cruces

Archie Beckett was born in Las Cruces in 1927. His father was born in El Paso and his mother was born in Monterey, Mexico. When Poncho Villa began killing Anglo men married to Mexican woman, his parents fled Mexico and eventually settled in Las Cruces. Because his father worked for the Reclamation Service, Archie spent a lot of time as a boy accompanying his father out to the river.

Flour mills

We used to go out to the Picacho Bridge, just north of it. It was called the bosque. It was full of big, old cottonwood trees. We used to play hide and seek. We used to spend a lot of time at Leasburg dam. We'd picnic there and then go swimming. I learned to swim in the irrigation ditches. People think we're crazy, but that's the only place we had.

There was much more water in the river because we didn't have the dams to hold it up. The water flowed 12 months of the year instead of 8 like it does now. There was more water in the river, and the current would cut into the banks. Finally the Boundary Commission steadied the banks. In 1941, the first year it ever ran over the spillway, we drove up and saw it come over the spill way.

It used to meander, just all around. There are places in Las Cruces where you can see the old river beds. One of them is over on Amador Street by my sister's farm. Another is on Main Street just south of Wallace Chevrolet. That's an old river bed.

There were trees all along, especially on the east side of the river, quite a few trees but what they called the bosque was up there by the Picacho bridge and down by the Leasburg Dam. Those were the big ones. They cut them all down. There were a few turkeys in there. Lots of rabbits, and I'm sure birds, but I didn't care what kind.

In the summer time, we had nothing else to do so we would go picnicking. A bunch of us would get together and we would all go down to the river.

They had flour mills. Oh, you know where First National Bank is now? There was a flour mill there that was on the ditch. Then there was one north of

town, just past Picacho over on Main Street. They were all on the ditch, not the river.

South of Canutillo, on the old road, there used to be lakes on both sides. The old road was kind of built up, but a lot of times my cousin and I would get out and walk in front of the car. The rains would come along and the lakes would cover the road and you couldn't tell where the road was. We would have to walk in front so my aunt would know where she was driving. We use to have lots more rain than we have now. It used to really rain in the summer time.



Margaret Favrot Las Cruces

Margaret Favrot was born in 1907 in El Paso, but spent much of her life in Las Cruces where she still lives. Her family ran a tuberculosis sanitarium in the North Alameda area of Las Cruces. Her story contains some elements common to our other interviewees, such as learning to swim in the irrigation ditches and picnicking at the river. But some of her memories are wonderful in their uniqueness, such as walking in front of the car so her aunt would not drive off the flooded roadway, or the recollection of flour mills located on the irrigation canals.



The Southwest Environmental Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands through education, advocacy and on-the-ground restoration work.

We invite you to learn more at our website:
www.wildmesquite.org.

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