

Making a living on the Colorado River

Matagorda rice farmers, oystermen and turf farmers rely on water controlled by LCRA.

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The Colorado River doesn't end in Lady Bird Lake. It rolls for another couple of hundred miles more to Matagorda County, where it spills into the Gulf of Mexico. Water use in the Austin area, and policy decisions made by the Lower Colorado River Authority, have consequences for people who make their livelihoods off the river. Below are quick profiles written in 2007, snapshots in time about people making their livelihood on the river - rice farmers, oystermen and biologists.

Rice farming troubles

BAY CITY - On an August morning in 1915, Aaron Simon, a Jew who had emigrated to the United States 12 years earlier to flee the pogroms and deprivations of Czarist Russia, led a motorcade from Bay City to Bastrop to address the Colorado River Improvement Association.

The Matagorda County civic leader sought a particular kind of protection: He wanted to make sure enough water would come down the river to feed, but not flood, the burgeoning rice industry on the coastal plain.

Twenty years later, the Lower Colorado River Authority's mammoth dam-building projects would, indeed, stabilize the river flow. And for the past couple of generations, the LCRA has made sure agricultural interests get their share of water: Matagorda County alone has more than 400 miles of irrigation canals branching off the Colorado.

But in January 2007, for the first time ever, the agency said it might cut off water supplies for Bay City's rice farmers. The announcement meant little to Austinites, but in Bay City, a bastion of American rice farming, it alarmed some, including Haskell Simon, the 74-year-old son of Aaron Simon, and a rice farmer himself.

His father, who had been conscripted into the czar's military in 1900, served along the Texas border in 1916 to rebuff Pancho Villa and fought in both world wars, had left his son with a sense of obligation to their adopted country. Haskell Simon, for his part, has spent a lifetime working on river water and groundwater matters: He travels, among other places, to Victoria for High Holy Day services and to Austin for board meetings of the LCRA.

Rice farms double as fertile wetlands for migratory birds - about 50 miles upriver from Bay City are Garwood Sporting Clays and the Garwood Hunting Club, near the Texas Rice Growers Co-Op

- and Simon says cutting off rice farmers will cut into the tourism of birders and the hunting industry.

"If we lose acres, it will have a negative effect on migratory water fowl," he says. "If there's a culprit, it's population growth in Austin. As cities need more and more water, there's less for us. I'm not concerned for myself (but) future generations need food to eat."

The LCRA, once a modest organization, has become one of the most powerful river authorities in the nation. By contrast, rice farming, propped up by government subsidies, intensive labor and steady floods of fresh water from the Colorado, has dwindled in the face of competition from foreign growers and thirsty cities and industries upriver.

"Its days are numbered," LCRA spokesman Robert Cullick said.

Texas growers have tried to expand their market, selling rice to nations as far-flung as Iran, Iraq and Cuba, but their industry is shrinking. Ten years ago, Texas rice fields occupied 260,000 acres; in 2007, they were down to 146,000 acres, according the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Among the remaining farmers is Billy Mann, 68, a 5-foot-6-inch, quiet-spoken man who took up rice farming at the age of 40, after years of working as a welder for a chemical engineering company. On a late afternoon on a several-acre spread of black dirt just south of Bay City, it's hard to see why he left that office job; a rice farm looks like what you might get if you turned an 8-year-old accustomed to building sand castles loose on a tractor.

"It's just something in you," he explains. "Why would anyone want to farm? If you put it on a computer program, look at all the risks and inputs and projected yields and price, most people would not do it. I think it's kind of a calling. I guess the Lord just made some people to farm and some people not to. Really and truly."

Reshaping the river

PALACIOS - This town is so humid that dress shoes tugged deep out of the closet have been known to sport a moldy fuzz. It has the salty odor and broken-down feel of a New England lobstering town, except at least half the residents seem to wear shin-high white PVC boots, the sign of being a shrimper or at least being sympathetic to shrimpers.

The shrimp industry, facing global competition, the challenge of fish farms and high diesel fuel costs, has tanked lately.

"Friends don't let friends eat farm-raised shrimp," a popular bumper sticker reads.

Palacios sits at one end of West Matagorda Bay, the fertile body of water at the head of the Colorado River whose straits are shared by sailboats, industrial barges and commercial trawlers.

"Everything in Austin eventually flows into my bay," says Bill Balboa, who heads a parks department station, as he pilots a small craft across the bay.

Balboa is a 46-year-old single dad, an ex-Marine with a peacenik streak. He has an enormous head - he even jokes about it - and flowing reddish hair. He grew up in Austin and went to Austin High and often uses Barton Springs as an analogy when talking about his bay:

"You know how water in Barton Springs picks up the runoff from development in the Hill Country? It's the same here."

He gestures toward uprooted trees reaching out of the water; the trees have washed downriver from spots as far upriver as La Grange.

His 22-foot craft, ingenious for its combination of power and flat bottom, was designed by the Trans, a Vietnamese family that runs one of the big shrimping fleets in Palacios. Vietnamese have to come to the Gulf Coast since the 1970s. At Baytown Seafood, a restaurant that serves up steamed, buttery vegetables alongside fresh oysters, a small altar to Buddha sits near the kitchen.

Balboa's destination: the spot where the Colorado dissolves into the Gulf.

Its position was not determined by God's will or force of nature; it was the doing of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

A century ago, there was no West or East Matagorda Bay; there was simply Matagorda Bay. An enormous logjam of debris extended nearly 50 miles and was so thick that trees sprouted from it, choking the river's mouth and flooding Lower County towns. In the late 1920s, a channel was dredged to ease the flow, and in 1929, the logjam was dynamited and washed downriver.

The effect was more or less immediate: Sediment began flowing downstream and formed a tidal marsh. In 1934, engineers dredged a new channel; the mud they brought up was used to divide the bay. Finally, in the 1990s, after biologists and anglers decided that diverting the river would boost biological productivity, the Corps of Engineers repositioned the last miles of the Colorado River yet again, digging a channel into West Matagorda Bay.

Ten miles east of where Balboa has steered the craft is the 1934 Bypass. It runs through the sleepy fishing village of Matagorda, a town of jolly-looking houses on 12-foot stilts. A wide beach curves by an LCRA nature preserve; for 50 years, that was the mouth of the Colorado. This is where a pair of Bay City women out for a weekly beachside stroll held up a small fish bone and said it revealed the cross of Jesus.

Ten miles to the west is the old, pre-1934 cut, and in a series of rough little inlets crowded with sea grass, one can find cemeteries of half-sunken barges now overgrown with cactus and oysters.

Now the Colorado dissolves into this delta, and fresh water mixes with salt water as a kind of nursery among marshy wetlands. The detritus bears nutrients important for animal life, Balboa says.

In turn, this spot - the intersection of the Colorado and the Gulf - is known as the Yankee Stadium of bird watching. It's not hard to see why: cormorants, osprey, egrets and herons fly nearby.

The shrimper way of life

MATAGORDA - Buddy Treybig lives in a trailer behind Arnold's Seafood, his oyster and shrimp packaging plant. It's only two miles from the plant to the Colorado River and just another five

miles to the Gulf Coast. Each dawn, shrimp trawlers during shrimp season and oyster trawlers during oyster season set out from this town.

His trailer is comfortable in an overfurnished sort of way. Plush sofas ring a shag rug.

"Excuse the mess," Treybig says. It's not actually messy, just a pile of clean, unfolded laundry sitting on one of the sofas.

Treybig is sinewy. He says he has lost weight since Gina, his wife and bookkeeper, left him not long before.

Oystering is the kind of 4 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. job that can wear a person, and a couple, down. Cecil Brannon, who walks with a bum knee he got when he drove his pickup into a concrete light post, tried his hand at running Arnold's Seafood for a year after Mr. Arnold retired. Brannon's wife was unhappy with the way they were giving their life to the business, so he sold the plant to Treybig, who had been a junior high classmate.

Brannon said he is a fisherman at heart, but he has been disentangling himself from the business. Matagorda is changing from a fishing village to a beach town, and Brannon, a hefty man who wears a camouflage hunting jacket, has taken up a home inspection course.

Buddy Treybig says all he knows is the fishing business. "And on the seventh day, God put Treybig in Matagorda," says Bill Balboa, the head of a state parks outpost in nearby Palacios.

At 353 square miles, Matagorda Bay is the second-largest estuary on the Texas Gulf. The lion's share of the bay's fresh water comes from the Colorado River. The fresh water is crucial to diluting seawater and delivering nutrients and sediments from the river's watershed.

Oysters, red drum and flounder, among other creatures, depend on the mix of fresh water and salt water to spawn and develop. Healthy fish support the commercial and recreational fishing industries and, in turn, the livelihoods of people like Buddy Treybig and his employees.

Treybig wears sunglasses - somewhere between aviator and sheriff - all day, even inside. He's got a beat-up Buddy's Seafood hat pulled low over his face, and he wears sweat pants and duck boots, making him look a little like he rolled out of bed on a rainy day and hurried to work.

Work for Treybig is just outside the trailer, in a small pair of immaculate white warehouses with tin roofs. One of these is a run-of-the-mill storage area. The other is the plant: a pair of walk-in refrigerators bookend a long hall where oysters are shucked and weighed.

In the first, briny-smelling, refrigerator are piled the oysters, stuffed into 110-pound Colombian coffee bags by the fishermen who pluck them from Gulf reefs each day. Each evening, the oyster boats deliver their haul to Buddy's place.

Before dawn, about 25 shuckers, mostly Mexican, mostly men, arrive. They arrange themselves elbow to elbow along an aluminum shucking counter that runs the length of the hall. Among them: Humberto Lopez, a young man with a black motorcycle T-shirt. He shucks next to his father and mother, who came here from Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1999.

Two men wearing waxy yellow overalls gather oysters from the first walk-in freezer and spill them onto the counter. The oysters are long, thick and sharp as glass. The shuckers use knives

to pry them open. The shells get collected and sold to the county to build roads. The meat is tossed into buckets of ice water. The hall echoes with loud cracking noises.

At the end of the hall is a weigh station; the shuckers are paid according to the weight of their buckets, so the faster they shuck, the more they earn. Lopez said he makes about \$70 a day; some make more, others less. The oysters are finally packaged and placed in the second refrigerator. In a cooler inside sit more than \$100,000 worth of oysters. They will be shipped everywhere from Bay City, 20 miles away, to San Francisco.

"The Colorado River is very important to a good quality product," Treybig says. Then, he volunteers, "The river's natural, and it wasn't mean to support cities."

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