

[By Brian Chasnoff](#) - San Antonio Express-News

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Seventy summers ago, a 16-year-old boy named C.P. Autrey climbed into a homemade canoe with a rifle, sparse provisions, a close friend and little else.

Escaping the Great Depression, the boys discovered a world of abundance as they paddled hundreds of miles down the San Antonio River to San Antonio Bay.

The journey brought hazards, including an upset hornets' nest, canoe-smashing rocks and one angry farmer with a shotgun. But Autrey said he and friend Fred Burkett Jr. thrived in clean, clear waters, shooting squirrels along the banks and capturing plenty of catfish.

Today, Autrey, 87, lives alone on the North Side. Years after Burkett's death, he's been thinking a lot about their trek to the coast, not to mention worrying about how the river and bay have changed.

He's not the only one.

This summer, the San Antonio River Authority, together with state agencies, began fieldwork on a four-year study of the river, a process that state lawmakers mandated for all rivers in Texas.

Now scientists are working to determine how much water is needed in the river to support the sort of healthy ecosystem that Autrey conjures in his memory with such bittersweet clarity.

“Oh, God, gorgeous,” he says, reflecting on the more pristine San Antonio River and its coastal estuary of more than half a century ago.

Populations have since swelled, degrading the water system with pollution and pumping. Worsened by the drought, a scarcity of freshwater flowing to the bay system has wreaked havoc on its ecosystem, experts say.

Yet in the past two decades, the San Antonio River has emerged from its darkest days, when black sewage flowed south from an overloaded wastewater treatment plant.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality stops short of recommending swimming, but water quality has improved.

Meanwhile, SARA is planning unprecedented access to the river in Bexar County.

The agency has purchased 3.8 acres of parkland here and 98 acres in Wilson County — the first major park owned by SARA — and is clearing logjams along a 12-mile stretch to make way for a paddling trail set to open in 2010.

“One of the top priorities of our staff and our board of directors is to create situations where the public can better appreciate the San Antonio River,” said Dale Bransford, manager of SARA's park services department.

A recent canoe trip down the meandering trail revealed lush, hidden landscapes. Yet for long stretches, the opaque waters were virtually still.

Al Segovia, the TCEQ's South Texas watermaster, has noticed.

River flows “are horrible,” Segovia said. “They're running at probably 10 percent of their normal capacities.”

On a fishing trip last year to San Antonio Bay, Autrey witnessed the consequences of a strained waterway.

“I didn't see a single mullet,” he said, “a skipjack, a shrimp, a crab, a minnow, nothing, a swirl of any fish, not a single bird diving in the water after a fish, not a single bird flying overhead.”

He added, “After being out there for three hours, I was whipped. I flailed the water with every lure I had, and I'm a damn good fisherman. I never got a strike. Never caught a fish.”

A journey south

In summer 1939, Autrey worked at a fruit stand on South Flores Street, earning 5 cents an hour. His family needed every cent.

“We were having a terrible time,” he said. “We were constantly broke.”

Then Burkett dreamed up the river excursion. Autrey said his friend made a canoe out of metal and whittled oars from pinewood.

“My mother said I shouldn't go,” Autrey said. “Well, I never did have any time off. When other kids were loafin', I was workin'. So I went anyhow.”

The boys secured pith helmets and stocked up on dried fruit and pinto beans. Autrey packed flour and lard, so they could make and cook empanadas under the stars.

One morning they awoke at 2 a.m. and slipped into the river at Concepción Park. Poplars and pecan trees rose up on both sides as the boys drifted south of the city. They shot and ate squirrels, using the guts to bait catfish.

Massive logjams often forced them ashore. Hauling the boat along the banks could take hours.

It rained the first night.

“We didn't have a tent,” Autrey said. “We couldn't afford a tent.”

They slept on a tarp beneath a mosquito net. Autrey said he took up smoking to keep the bugs away.

But the boys were happy. Mostly, they sang and whistled, using the river to soak beans and bathe.

“We were always clean,” Autrey said. “You could dive underwater and see. The water was clear.”

In places, the river also was swift. Autrey said he and Burkett argued only once.

“When we got near rapids, I thought he was loafin',” he said. “You had to get the boat into the right stream, rather than run into a boulder.”

Near Floresville, they hit a rock that punched a hole in the canoe. So they sold it for 50 cents and tried to hitchhike home.

Then along came Burkett's mom in a 1934 Plymouth.

“She had told the paper about us,” Autrey said. “She said, ‘No, no, you can't quit.’”

The boys bought the boat back for a dollar, repaired it with tar and set out to finish the trip. A week later, a stretch of gorgeous, uninhabited river country near Falls City rewarded their perseverance.

Then Autrey grabbed a willow limb to pull the canoe ashore.

“When I pulled it forward, it brought a wasps' nest within a foot of my face,” he said. “It was yellow jackets, those long ones, nearly 2 inches long, and 12 of them stung me in the face and neck.”

Autrey flipped backward into the river. Burkett wasn't stung.

“I laid up on the beach, and my face swelled so badly I couldn't see,” Autrey said. “And old Fred would sit there and laugh at me. ‘You look like Porky Pig,’ he'd say.”

There was little Autrey could do.

“One thing we did not take,” he said, “was any kind of first aid.”

'Master variable'

A year after Autrey's trek, San Antonio expanded beyond its original Spanish charter. Its population swelled 61 percent in the next decade to more than 408,000 people, according to the Handbook of Texas Online.

People had been pulling water from the river since the 1700s.

But as more people crowded the river basin, more water was pumped from it, and claims for the resource began rising significantly in the 1960s, according to data from the TCEQ, which issues permits for water rights.

One effect of pumping is reduced flows — a measurement of a river's volume and velocity that Joe Trungdale calls the “master variable.”

“It sets the habitat conditions in the river,” said Trungdale, an Austin-based water engineer. “It also maintains water quality conditions.”

Now, some rivers in the state would stop flowing if everybody with a permit to pull water did so at the same time.

When Autrey scanned the sky for birds above San Antonio Bay last year, he likely was experiencing the effects of reduced inflows to coastal estuaries exacerbated by the drought.

Freshwater flowing to the bay system has supported a diverse ecosystem that includes blue crabs and the endangered whooping cranes that consume them.

But one-third of the rivers' water is not reaching the bays, according to Tom Stehn, whooping crane coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Without those inflows, the ecosystem down here, the estuary just crashes,” Stehn said.

In the current drought, TCEQ is exercising its rights to suspend or reduce some water rights based on seniority. But Stehn worries there's no mechanism to restore river water that's already been claimed.

“Parts of the bay are saltier than the Gulf of Mexico, and everything is suffering,” he said, noting that 23 cranes died last winter, leaving 247 in the bay area.

He added, “The fate of this species depends on what Texas does.”

The Legislature in 2001 required the state to assess the health of its rivers, and two years ago another law established how the state should use the findings to balance environmental concerns with water needs.

“Once those (flow) numbers exist, TCEQ will take those numbers into account in writing new permits,” said Paul Montagna, an ecosystem studies chair at the Harte Research Institute in Corpus Christi.

Montagna, who sits on a scientific advisory panel that will help the state assess the health of its rivers, added, “Some rivers, it might actually be too late.”

Steak and ice cream

It took three days for the swelling in Autrey's face to subside. They camped at an idyllic spot near Falls City.

Five decades later, residents there would notice “a smelly, dark flow of sewage coursing down the river for almost eight hours,” according to a previous San Antonio Express-News report.

They would come to find out that the source was an overloaded sewage treatment plant in San Antonio. In 1985, the Rilling Road plant had been polluting the river with untreated sewage for more than a decade.

SARA would sue the city that year, and two years later San Antonio would shutter the plant and open the high-performing Dos Rios Waste Water Recycling Center.

Once Autrey healed, he and Burkett returned to the river. Provisions were running low, so they raided nearby fields for corn and watermelons.

One farmer didn't like that and fired a shotgun at them, Autrey said.

Not everyone along the river was hostile.

In Goliad, a rancher recognized the boys from the newspaper and offered them steak and ice cream.

“He was so in love with the idea of what we were doing,” Autrey said. “A lot of people might have had thoughts or aspirations of doing something like that, just quit everything and just enjoy yourself. That's what we did.”

Soon after, the boys struck salt marshes bordering the bay. The water was shallow, so they abandoned the canoe..

Burkett “wrote a note and left the boat to the mayor” of Seadrift, Autrey said.

Hitchhiking home, the boys ate little until a creamery truck driver recognized their faces and invited them to climb in the back and eat anything they wanted.

“Well, we knocked ourselves out,” Autrey said. “It was awful cold in there.”

The journey had taken six weeks.

Life went on. Later, Autrey fought in World War II as an infantryman. After the war, Autrey married and worked in auto and home sales. His wife of 57 years died in 2002.

Over the years, he lost touch with Burkett, who died of cancer about four years ago.

Near the end of his own life, Autrey chokes up when he recalls their friendship. He's as proud of the river journey as anything he's accomplished.

“I don't know anybody who did what I did in spite of the Depression,” he said.

The lifelong outdoorsman was glad to hear about recent efforts to open the river to the public and assess its health. But he echoed concerns that inflows to the bay system have been inadequate for too long.

Officials with SARA expect to conclude the in-stream study mandated by the Legislature by 2013.

“That's wonderful that there's something in the works for the future,” Autrey said. “I feel that it's a terrible legacy that we have left these bays for our heirs, and there's nothing there left to take.”

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