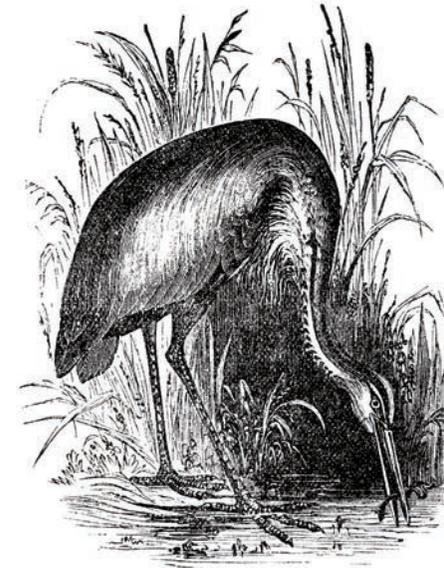


# *A Return to the River*



INSPIRED BY JOHN GRAVES' *GOODBYE TO A RIVER*, A WRITER RETURNS TO HER ROOTS ON THE GUADALUPE

*Story by* CLAYTON MAXWELL

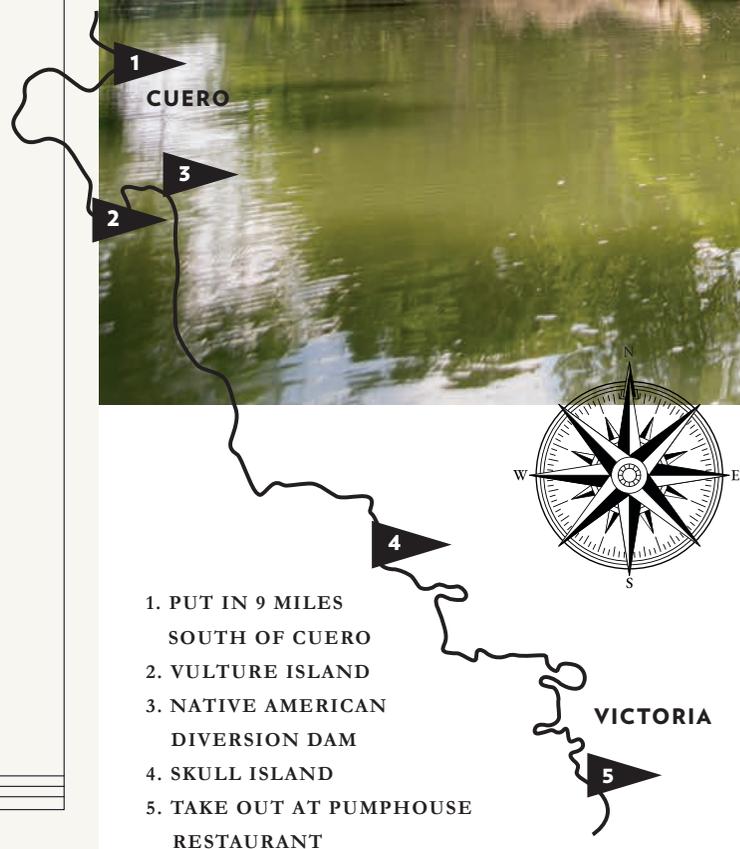
*Photographs by* KENNY BRAUN



**F**or three days, the blue heron leads us downriver. In the mornings we push off in canoes through the olive green water of the lower Guadalupe, made murkier by Hurricane Harvey's visit just over a month before. We'd forget about the heron while focusing on more urgent matters: sunscreen, keeping the boat upright, alligators, spicy peanuts, cold beer. But then, with an audible swoosh, its blue wings unfurl, and the bird glides downstream to yet another cypress branch, showing off his mighty wingspan, his graceful flight. Hurricane Harvey's landfall in late August caused the Guadalupe to flow over its banks in Victoria and Cuero. And while many trees are down and furniture hangs high in the branches of others during our October trip, the flood certainly hasn't washed away everything beautiful.

At least I think it's the same blue heron surprising us each morning, but maybe that's because I'm a romantic and a rookie on overnight river trips. Out on this water, a current flowing close to civilization and yet a world away from it, magical things feel possible. A river makes its own country: the past loops into the present, new confluences are made, a heron is leading us.

I am canoeing this rarely traveled stretch of the Guadalupe with two seasoned river runners and their young sons because of John Graves' *Goodbye to a River: A Narrative*, a classic of Texas literature. I'd read it over the summer, and Graves' voice, honest and wry, carried me with him on his 1957 three-week canoe trip down the Brazos starting in Palo Pinto County and ending in Somervell County. Graves—Texas' roll-your-own-smokes fireside thinker and naturalist—passed away five years ago this July, but with lines like "We will be nearly finished, I think, when we stop understanding the old pull toward green things and living things," his writing is as vital as ever.



1. PUT IN 9 MILES SOUTH OF CUERO
2. VULTURE ISLAND
3. NATIVE AMERICAN DIVERSION DAM
4. SKULL ISLAND
5. TAKE OUT AT PUMPHOUSE RESTAURANT

**It's good to "take account" of where you come from.** That's one of the messages Graves whispered in my ear. But what does that mean? For Graves, it meant really knowing the river and the land he grew up on, the fish and fowl, the people's stories, including the story of "The People," the Comanche term for their tribe. It meant returning to the Brazos, the river of his youth. So I was going to return to mine.

I grew up in Victoria, and the stretch of the Guadalupe that flows through the town's Riverside Park was a frequent playground for my sisters and me; our parents would hold our hands as we stood in the current, toddlers dazzled by sun-lit water rushing against our legs. This muddy river named in

1689 for the patron saint of Mexico—*Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*—was my childhood taste of Graves' "old pull" toward the green and living things, the raw and the wild. I left Victoria when I was 16, but now I am back, this time in a boat, John Graves-style.

"What you are doing, going to be on the river, that is what brought people here, why any of this is here," Gary Dunnam, the former head of the Victoria County Heritage Department, told me when I visited him just before our trip. The Guadalupe is the area's history, Dunnam explained. It's why the Karankawas, Aranamas, Tamiques, and Tonkawas were here, followed by the Spaniards who tried with mixed results

## RIVER GUIDE

---

For your own Cuero and Victoria-based Guadalupe River day trip, see:

**Gerry's Kayaks**, a rental and shuttling company located in Riverside Park. Call 361-935-3779; [gerryskayaks.com](http://gerryskayaks.com)

**San Antonio Bay Partnership**, a nonprofit conservation group that leads guided day-paddling trips. Call 713-829-2852; [sabaypartnership.org](http://sabaypartnership.org)

**Texas Parks and Wildlife's Guadalupe Valley and Victoria paddling trails:**  
[tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/inland/](http://tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/inland/)

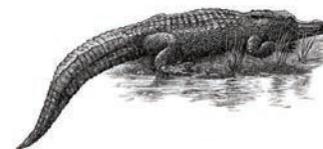
**Unguided overnight trips** on this stretch of the Guadalupe require river experience and Google Earth for planning camping spots, which often change with the river.



Writer Clayton Maxwell returns to her childhood river, the Guadalupe.

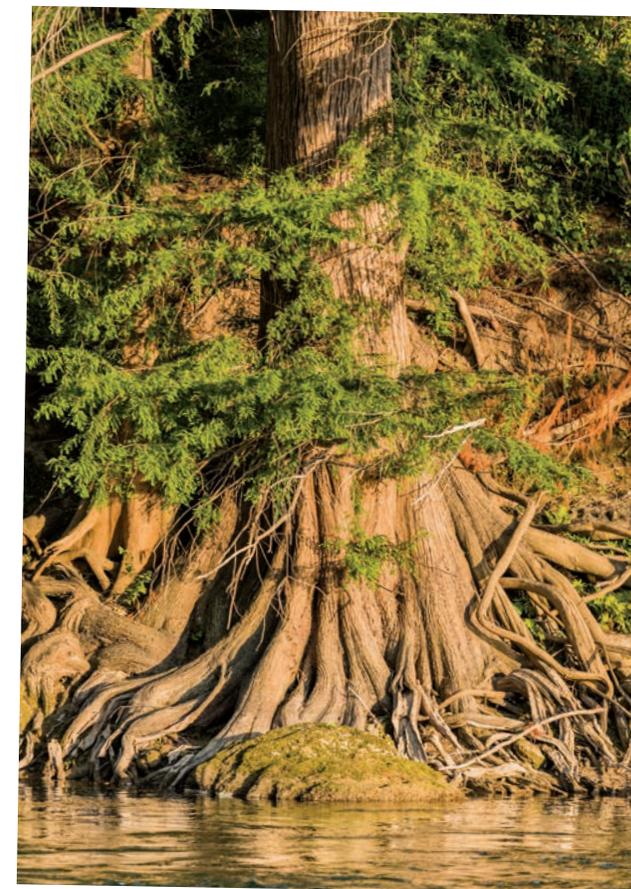
to Christianize the tribes in the early 1700s. Then, in 1824, after Mexico won independence from Spain, the wealthy Mexican *empresario* Martín De León came to the river after receiving a colonization grant from Mexico. He brought 41 families with him and named the settlement *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Jesús Victoria* in honor of the first president of Mexico. De León, 6 feet tall with a dashing mustache, was the sole Mexican *empresario* in the region until he died in a cholera epidemic in 1833. His wife, Doña Patricia de la Garza, and their large extended family continued to preside over life in Victoria until they were forced into exile in 1836 after the Mexican defeat at San Jacinto, even though they had supported the Texas Revolution.

Would I find traces of this tangled history on the river? Or would I find alligators and snakes dangling from trees, as my mom had warned? The unknown loomed. I did know, however, that it would be foolish for me—all eagerness and no experience—to do it alone. So I asked Chris Carson and John Hewlett, two friends and ardent canoeists, to join me. Chris is a photographer who seems to spend more time on water than on land. John is a school principal and outdoor adventurer who founded the Austin-based gear company, Gusto Outfitters—its cooling neck wraps, called “bandos,” would become our second skins on the river.



**On a hot Saturday mid-morning**, we unload at an RV park 9 miles south of Cuero. After multiple trips from van to boat, the canoes are teetering with the weight of two coolers, waterproof boxes with iPhones and GPS devices, tents and sleeping bags, yellow dry sacks stuffed with clothes and first-aid supplies, fishing gear, a camping stove, provisions ranging from breakfast taco fixings to Chris' favorite jalapeño sausages, mezcal and whiskey, and a very important tube of WaterWeld epoxy that would save our trip when one canoe sprang a leak.

Chris has even brought pillows. “I get a lot of hell for it,” he says, “But what can I say? I’m a pillow guy.” Graves might have cringed, although his own canoe weighed 200 pounds thanks to what he called “unnecessaries,” including a gun, an ax, and a lantern. Graves laments that he, too, falls short of Henry David Thoreau’s call for simplicity. Just hauling and strapping down all of our own “unnecessaries” makes us sweat before we’ve even begun paddling. Sticky in the late morning sun, we take our baptismal swim in the Guadalupe, eyes alert for Harvey-displaced gators. Hallelujah, the river is far cooler and fresher than we’d thought; it’s an elixir, a fatigue-conquering mood-lifter. This river is going to be good to us.



**“WE WILL BE NEARLY FINISHED, I THINK, WHEN WE STOP UNDERSTANDING THE OLD PULL TOWARD GREEN THINGS AND LIVING THINGS.”**

Now we paddle. Up in the bow, I have it easy. John’s son Harlon, whose nickname is Huckle for Huckleberry Finn, rests in the middle on a pile of tents and sleeping bags. John is our captain in the back. Devoted fishermen Chris and his 9-year-old son, Max, linger behind, poles in the water. There is no other soul on this quiet stretch of river, and we are in the flow of it, gliding downstream with “the waxen slim strength of a paddle’s shaft,” as Graves’s writes, on “a drifting, sparkling, sunlit afternoon.”

I am surprised by many things: the swiftness of the current, a bald eagle flashing across the sky—my first eagle sighting in South Texas—but mostly by the beauty. The section of river that I knew in Riverside Park, as I’d remembered it,

was not particularly pretty. But before the trip, I chatted over chalupas with Gerry Wyant, owner of Gerry's Kayaks in Riverside Park. Gerry rents kayaks for river trips and runs a hot dog stand (currently under renovation due to damage from Harvey) near the Texas Zoo in the park. Gerry shared many tips about canoeing that section of the Guadalupe—most notably that he'd never heard of any skirmishes with alligators. He also said the section of river we'd be on is the prettiest stretch of the Guadalupe there is. I see now he's right. It's the cypresses. They line the river here, faintly mystical with their knobby roots, which Harlon calls "dragon's teeth."

So we paddle on. With a lift of the shoulders and a twist of the spine, our paddles cut liquid and we glide. As Graves writes, "I had the feel of the river now, and the boat, and the country, and all of it was long-ago familiar." With the elaborate map-studying, weather-prognosticating, and other preparations over, we sink into the state of observation that a river invites. Eyes on the water, the banks, the sky—there is much to notice. A kingfisher skims the river. An alligator gar, at least 5 feet long, jumps out of the water and twists its toothy maw right in my face. I startle, and the boat wobbles, my first rookie move so far. Wobbling can mean tipping the boat. All of Chris' camera gear, everything we need, is in these canoes. Tipping, Chris repeats often, is not an option.

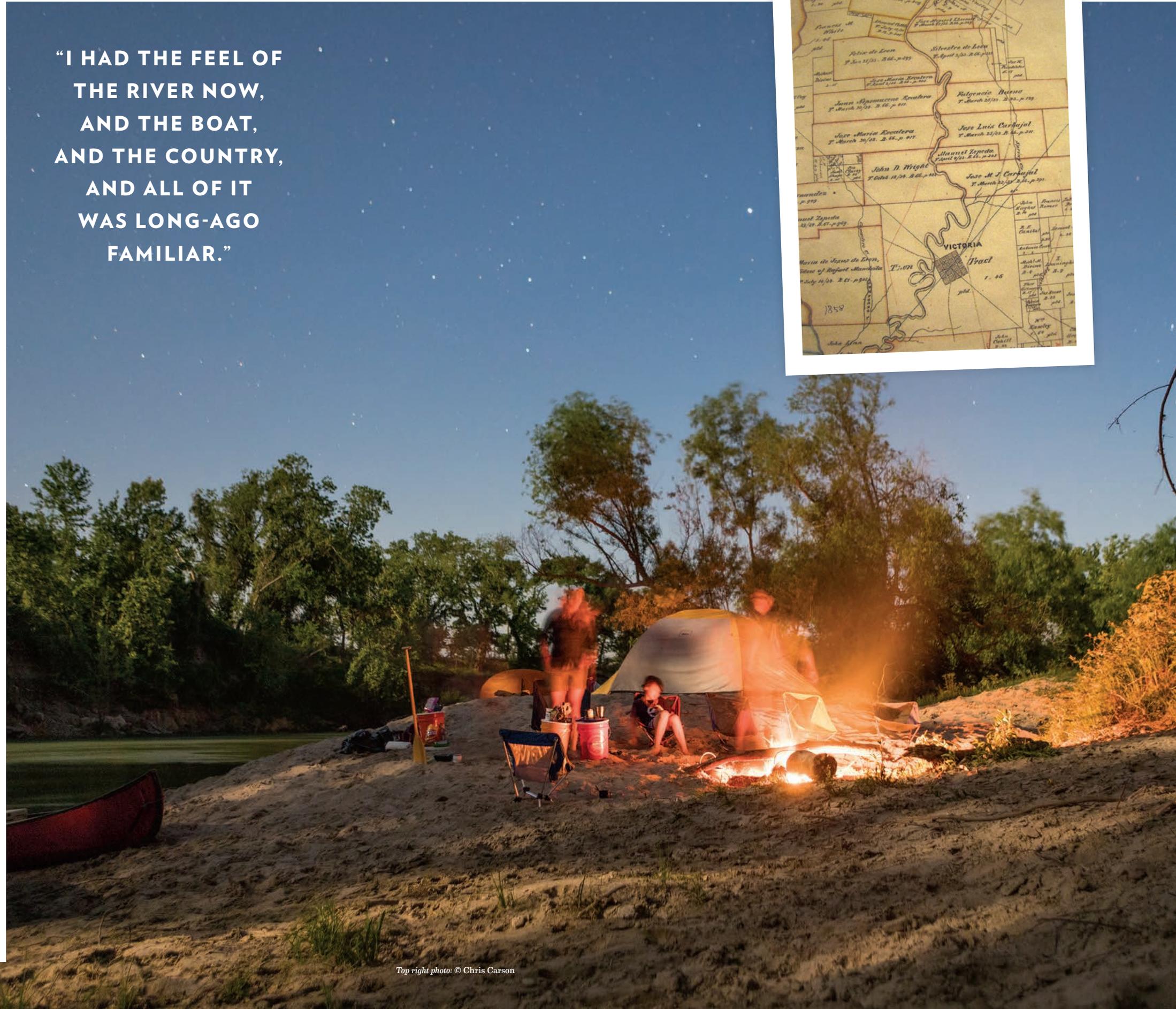
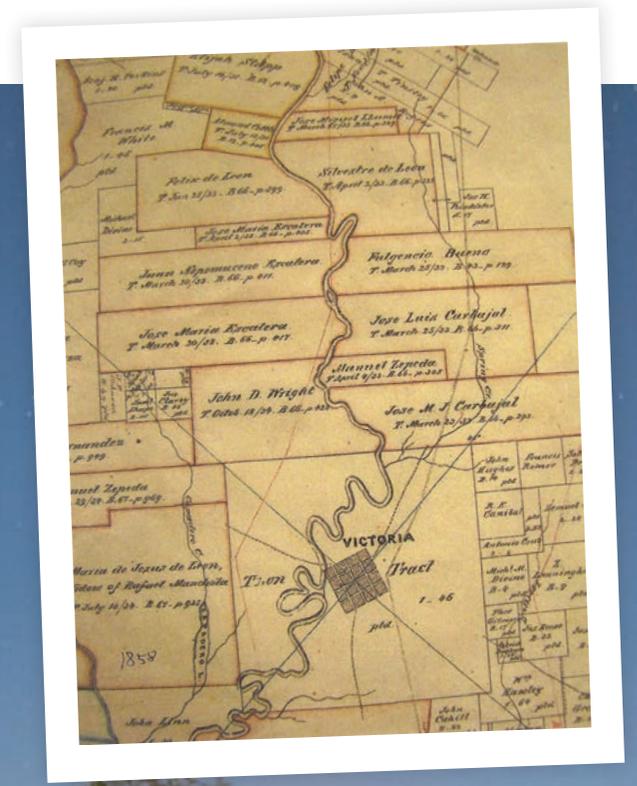
When the heat threatens, we dip our bandos in the river to keep cool and shield our necks from the sun. When possible, we make a landing and jump in. Six-year-old Harlon, whose spirit animal must be an otter, is happiest in the water. So when we first find a clean sandbar with a riffle flowing past, he and John demo for me how to do "a float." We make ourselves straight as logs skimming over rocks until we get to a safe landing spot and trudge up to shore—all smiles—to do it again.



**Before the sun dips low**, we find our camp spot, a sandy island we soon discover is black with vultures in the trees and sky. Chris slaps his paddle on the water, and the piercing shotgun sound scares them away. "Vulture Island" is now our home for the night. The boys gather firewood, Max catches spiky little hellgrammites—the larvae of a dobsonfly—that he will later use to catch catfish, while Chris, or "Cooky," gets busy with dinner, which tonight is canned bean chili.

"The day's wind and bright light and paddling had washed me with clean fatigue, and my muscles felt good, in tone ... one felt damned good," Graves wrote. Now, after today's 10 miles of paddling, I get it. We've hit that sweet spot where effort turns

**"I HAD THE FEEL OF  
THE RIVER NOW,  
AND THE BOAT,  
AND THE COUNTRY,  
AND ALL OF IT  
WAS LONG-AGO  
FAMILIAR."**





## “[WE] HUNG OVER THE FIRE WITH SHARP ANIMAL RELISH UNTIL WE KNEW WE HAD TO LEAVE.”

to ease, and we can settle into our island. These ever-shifting sand and mud teardrops are often the only good place to camp on many stretches of Texas rivers without trespassing, and it feels like a sweet victory to have found ours—surrounded by private ranches—and make it home for the night.

“We are tapping into something that is crazy beautiful,” says Chris, sitting by the fire that night as the moon rises over the river, a bottle of mezcal making the rounds. All the effort these two river-mad friends of mine go to—the hoisting and hauling and planning—it delivers keys to a rare universe, one removed from park rangers, people, private property. Their reward is cicada song layered over the murmur of water and a pocket of freedom in the middle of a river. We stay up late with John’s river music playlist, fireside tales, a little Walt Whitman.

“[We] hung over the fire,” Graves wrote, “with sharp animal relish until we knew we had to leave.”

“**On down**”—that’s a refrain Graves repeats throughout *Goodbye to a River*, and I see why: the thrill of discovering what’s around the bend. We lament leaving our campsite, but a river is only good if it’s flowing. Unhurried and with muscles only pleasantly sore, we set out, easing into another 10- to 12-mile day. And with a gasp we see the blue flash of the heron, waiting for us, leading us downriver.

Today we are on the lookout for an almost 300-year-old remnant of the Spanish effort to missionize along the Guadalupe: a stone dam built in 1733 by “converts” at La Bahía, located here before it moved to Goliad. We find the weathered but still intact wall of rocks easily, land our canoes, jump off the dam, and do a float. The kids investigate the smooth river rocks and purple-tinged mother-of-pearl clamshells on the beach. Did Aranama or Tamique children jump from this dam under the watchful eye of Franciscan friars centuries ago? “The way it was, like the way so many things were, is a fog,” Graves, a practitioner of thoughtful uncertainty, writes about the history around the Brazos. It’s foggy here, too.

After hours of rigorous paddling, including several of what Chris and John call “the power 20” (20 power strokes followed by a pause), Harlon is restless and shouts for a swim break, *now*, but we are not in a safe landing spot. I hear John say behind me, calmly, “Harlon, look at me, I want you to understand something. We don’t make the river; we don’t have any control over where the islands and banks are going to be. We have to take what the river gives us.”

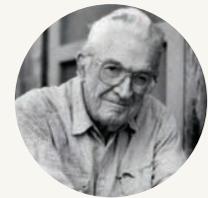
So far, this river has been generous. We bivouac our last night on “Skull Island,” named for an unidentifiable skull we find perched in the middle of it. We pitch camp near the river to hear its rippling as we sleep. After dinner, we return to the fire. Here, away from the strip malls and highways, there is space to consider our predecessors: the Native Americans, who couldn’t have imagined the arrival of the Spanish; the De León clan, upended by the Revolution. “Think about that—this island has been camped on, this whole stretch of river, for thousands of years,” Chris says, thumbing the smooth cuts in the Native American spear point he’d found among the river rocks earlier in the day. This quiet moment—this whole river trip, in fact—is required in order to step out of time and reflect on the flow of history. Here by the moonlit river, it hits you in a way that placards and dioramas in museums can’t touch.

Our last day is a haul as we push through 14 miles to reach our take-out. The cypresses on this stretch were cut down long ago, and the ensuing erosion, extreme after Harvey, gives this part of the river a post-apocalyptic feel. After 35 miles of river, Chris and John are ready for the cold micheladas I will buy them at La Tejanita Restaurant as soon as we find our exit,

which proves difficult. Riverside Park is closed still from the hurricane, and the dock that should be waiting for us is not there. Weary, we find a long metal staircase leading out of slippery mud to the PumpHouse Riverside Restaurant and Bar 25 feet above us. The unload is a haze of back-aching effort, carrying our “unnecessaries” up the stairs. Kayak Gerry awaits and helps retrieve Chris’ van. We find La Tejanita, and the micheladas, served in generous goblets, are glorious.

Graves’ trip was about solitude, mostly. Mine has been about companionship. Had I been solo, I would have missed the chance to see my childhood through the eyes of my friends’ sons—Max’s face upon catching his catfish or Harlon’s laughter floating downstream: flashes of beauty that thread back to my earliest days on the Guadalupe and live on, on down the river. 🐟

*Clayton Maxwell is a native Texan and river-canoeing rookie who is happy that her dog-eared, margin-scribbled copy of Goodbye to a River is now christened with water and mud from the Guadalupe. Austin-based photographer Kenny Braun’s new book, As Far As You Can See: Picturing Texas, was just released by UT Press.*



### JOHN GRAVES

John Graves (1920-2013), a Texas writer and naturalist, won national acclaim for *Goodbye to a River*, published in 1960. His ecology and history-rich memoir of a three-week canoe trip down the Brazos River was nominated for a National Book Award. Graves grew up in Fort Worth and on his grandfather’s ranch near Cuero, was a Marine captain in World War II, graduated from both Rice and Columbia universities, taught at Texas Christian University, and traveled the globe.

