She Spoke of Her River

The Concho River’s History

Written by Pam Backlund
featuring “The Pearl of the Conchos”
sculpted by Jayne Charless Beck 1993
and enlarged by Garland Weeks
Introduction

The City of San Angelo is blessed with three wonderful rivers. But in 1994 the 4.5 mile stretch of the North Concho River that travels through downtown San Angelo was named “the most impacted river of Texas.” The North Concho River has a problem.

The River Corridor Commission and the Upper Colorado River Authority are both addressing that problem; and the Friends of the River, Public Education Committee has researched how the river got to its present condition.

Teaching the public about these facts may be an effective way of protecting our river. Because once we understand a problem, we can make informed decisions about it. And so, here is a brief pictorial history of this “people-inhabited arid land” and its rivers, from about 1850 to 1998.

May our children and our children’s children always have clean water to drink and a delightful river to visit.

River Corridor Commission 1998
Richard Easingwood, Chairman
Francile Morrill, Vice Chairman
Pamela Clark
Dr. Jackson (Doc) Smith
Ron Jones
Joe Kilman
John B. Hemphill
Ron Wilyard
Irene Metzen

Upper Colorado River Authority 1998
C. Skeete Foster, Chairperson
Ruby Gutierrez, Vice Chairperson
Doris Sonnenberg
Jennie Roberts
Ray Alderman
Ralph Hoelscher
Fred R. Campbell
Jack Brewer
Hope Huffman

Friends of the River Public, Education Committee 1995-1997
John Parsons, Kyle Hinkle, Debbie Vinson, Rick Weiss, Pam Backlund, Bob Harper, John Hemphill, Patsy Kneller, Dan Rodriguez, Richard Easingwood, Johnny Ross

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Designed by: Michael C. Aaglin
Printed by: San Angelo Standard-Times
San Angelo, Texas 1998
Every river in Texas is valuable. Concho Valley people, though,
And so, she spoke of her river one fine autumn day...

Once there was a river with a mermaid statue in it. Three kids and a dad were nearby, enjoying the day.

Dezzereae, Miranda and Haley were chasing a Monarch butterfly which eventually landed on the mermaid statue. They couldn’t catch the butterfly without falling in the water, so they waited and watched. Miranda’s dad settled down on the Celebration Bridge to read to his daughter.
Suddenly, the mermaid began speaking.
Surprisingly she asked, “Has a pipe ever broken at your house, forcing you to have no water for a day?”

The kids looked at each other. They looked at Miranda and her dad.
Who were intently reading and did not hear the mermaid speak.

The mermaid asked another question. “Why do people need river and lake water?”

Moments passed. Finally Dezzerae said, “For fishing.”
Haley added, “For skiing.”
Dezzerae continued, “For swimming, too.”

Photo: Bruce Backlund
"The mermaid smiled sweetly, "You are both right. But mostly, all living things really need water to survive. That's why this river is so special."

During another moment of silence, Haley thought she might not speak again. "Please keep talking to us, Ms. Mermaid," he begged.

Three more butterflies landed on the mermaid and she then continued, "Do you children know much about my river?"

Not knowing anything about the river, Dezzerae asked, "What is there to know about a river?"
"Well, my river has a history I'd like to share. A long time ago the river and its land were home to many wild things such as buffalo, butterflies, birds and bats.

Grass covered most of the land.

Most trees grew only directly by the river.

Sometimes the river was deep and wide. Other times the river was shallow and thin. Native Americans occasionally came to the valley to enjoy the refreshing river and land.

It was a lonely time for me, because for a long time, only a few living things depended on this changing river," said the mermaid.

Jackie Parker's painting (below) illustrates how the area may have looked in the 1850s. Jackie is a student at Central High School. Compare her painting to the photo (page 34) taken from the Cactus Hotel in 1998.
From the Journal of John Russell Bartlett, traveling from Fredericksburg to Pecos (Horsehead Crossing.)
Connected with the United States and Mexican Boundary Commission, he traveled throughout the southwest and described what he saw.

October 24, 1850:
"...the South Fork or Boiling Concho is deep, clear and in many places, rapid. The flat country continued, with a few mesquits (mesquite) and an occasional live oak. The grass is good... further over similar country brought us to Good Spring Creek, a stream of clear cold water. It was yet but one o'clock; but as the grass was unusually fine, with wood and water in abundance, I determined to rest the remainder of the day."

October 25, 1850:
"The creek was five or six feet deep near our camp, but after a little search we found...easy passage across... We now made...for the Green Mounds (Twin Buttes) which appeared but a few miles from us up a gradual ascent. They lay north-east and south-west of each other...and we passed directly between them. While the train (wagon) moved along, I ascended the easterly mound, accompanied by several others, to see the character of the country before us. These mounds or hills are about five hundred feet high, and had been but recently burnt over; hence their color was far from being green. Not a blade of grass was to be seen. A few half-burnt bushes and tufts of the yucca were all the vegetation that remained. From the summit we saw the Concho River running in a northeasterly direction, some six or seven miles distant. Reached it at five o'clock, when with great joy, we again struck the Emigrant Road...which we had last seen south of the San Saba. Very few trains (wagons) had passed over it, so that it was not more distinct than the roads or paths through a northern meadow."
Haley asked, "Why did the river change?"

The mermaid shared her wisdom, "Rivers are always changing. That's just nature's way. More rain means fast-moving, deep water. Less rain means slow-moving, shallow water. Because the weather changes, the river does, too."

"But people can always find beauty in changes, if they want to. In fact, many people have found goodness in my river. Many people have decided, throughout time, to live here, and they have all been welcome."

A ford, place for crossing of the North Concho River, upper photo (circa 1919), is an example of shallow, slow-moving water.

The North Concho River near Water Valley after a big rain, middle photo, is an example of deeper, fast-moving water.

A make-shift home was made among the large boulders on the North Concho River, lower photo (circa 1870s). Homes like this were built quickly during times when the water was low, but were easily destroyed by the flash floods that frequented the river. The population of San Angelo in 1871 was approximately 100 people.

All photos courtesy of: West Texas Collection, Angelo State University
Rain affects River Size in two ways

1. Some rain runs off the land (called a watershed) and quickly goes into creeks and rivers.

This water is called “runoff”.

2. Part of the rain though, soaks into the ground,
   • to be used by plants
   • to become groundwater.

Groundwater (in an aquifer) sometimes leaks into rivers and is called “spring water.”
"The first people of my river, the Native Americans, never stayed here very long. They preferred to migrate with the buffalo. But when other people wanted to travel through or actually live near my river, a couple of groups of Native Americans wanted to scare the new people away.

So Fort Concho was built to show the Native Americans that new people could live by my river. Various soldiers stayed at the Fort for 22 years.

San Angelo, or "town across the river" became home to many newcomers, partly because of the Fort, and partly because it is a really nice place to live. My river was special to the new people of the 1860s - 1890s."

Barrels outside Fort Concho's Post Surgeon's Quarters contained river water (circa 1871). The water collected nearby, contained mud or dirt which would settle after a few hours. But the water was only "drinkable" for about a day. The next day, germs made the water suitable only for the animals, laundry or general cleaning. The photo was taken from the hospital, facing north and belongs to the Fort Concho National Historic Landmark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
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<td>1910</td>
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Tom Green County changed in its size and human population in its early years. 15 present day counties were originally included in Tom Green County. 14 counties gradually seceded.
**Upper left** (circa early 1880s) View of San Angelo looking north from the Water Works Tower located on Concho Avenue, halfway between Irving and Randolph Streets. Photo: West Texas Collection of ASU

**Both right photos** (1998)
TCA Cable Company happens to have a tower in the same location of the old water tower of the 1880s. (see map) Larson Lloyd of TCA Cable allowed Rodney Barta to climb the tower in order to photograph the city from the same angles as photographers did in the 19th Century. Both county courthouses are on the same property.

This Fort Concho photo below, was taken from the San Angelo Water Works Tower, looking SE in 1886. Note the absence of pecan trees which had most likely been cut for San Angelo buildings or for firewood.
The North Concho River, in this photo, is very shallow and slow-moving.
San Angelo only received 10.75 inches of rain in 1886. This photo belongs to Fort Concho which was an active fort from 1867 to 1889.

*The naming of San Angelo:*
"town across the river" or "over the river" 1868
"Santa Angela" or "Saint Angela" early 1870's
"San Angelo" 1875-1883
"Concho City" and "Fort Concho" suggested names never accepted 1875-1883
"San Angelo" 1883 - present
“As time went on, more people, more plants, and more animals began to depend on the river water. Sometimes the river became so shallow, slow-moving and warm, that it began to stink. The smelly river was not a welcome change.”

Two more butterflies sat on the mermaid as she said,

“Even when the river became stinky though, a big rain would eventually come along to wash the stinky stuff away.

_A cleansing rain is a good thing for a river._

“So shallow, warm and slow rivers become stinky.” concluded Dezzerae.

“Yes,” she answered.
Getting drinkable water wasn’t easy for the pioneers.

Although Tom Green County has the most waterways of any Texas county, getting it to homes without pipes was a daily event. Many San Angelans paid people (top photo) to haul water for them, probably from the South Concho. During the 1870s & 1880s, the going price was about 10 cents per barrel and for some, a simple flag displayed on their house signaled the “water man” of their need for water on that day.

Photo: TGC Historical Society, West Texas Collection, ASU

Not really liking the taste of North Concho water, Fort Concho soldiers, with 6 miles, a wagon and barrels, went daily to the present-day Ben Ficklin Dam area near Hwy 87. A spring located there, Soldier’s Spring, leaked very clean groundwater (right photo). The soldiers prevented the spring water from mixing with the South Concho river water by building a stone “spring pool”. They could then collect spring water instead of river water. When the river would rise from rain, it took a lot of work to reestablish the “spring pool.”

(left map) The River System of the Concho Country as described in: The Standard, October 26, 1889.

(right map) A map of San Angelo in 1890.
A soft breeze fluttered the pages of Miranda’s dad’s book. He kept reading. “Did the people back then actually drink river water?”

“How could anyone drink stinky water?” Haley asked.

She answered, “People got sick from drinking stinky water. So they collected rainwater off of their roofs. And they dug deep holes in the ground and found good water there. Some put windmills over the holes or wells, to pull the groundwater up for their families, gardens and animals. People didn’t worry about water as much, once they could get groundwater. Given a choice, people mostly preferred ground water (well or spring), secondly, rain water (when it eventually rained) and finally, river water. There weren’t many choices. They felt lucky to have any water at all.”

“Good water has been found at 37 feet on Harry Emerick’s place in the North part of town.”

The Standard July 19, 1884

“Well boring is getting to be fashionable. Over 15 wells have been bored within the past 2 months in San Angelo. Walter Harris is having one bored on his place on Beauregard Avenue.”

The Standard August 9, 1884

Advertisement:

WELL BORING
PROMPTLY DONE BY
D.H. PARKER
San Angelo Texas
Rates: $2.50 per foot for the first 100 ft. and $3.00 for the second

The Standard November 1, 1884

Illustration courtesy of the Lower Colorado River Authority
Photo: TGC Historical Society, West Texas Collection, ASU
Fort Concho doctors, in their monthly reports, were always very concerned about the water situation. Intestine problems and typhoid from contaminated water were a constant threat. They recommended these steps:

When barrels (A) become moldy; remove water, allow to dry, fill partially with straw, and set straw on fire. The fire will kill mold and germs on the inside of the wooden barrel.

Build underground cisterns or tanks (B), using a lot of manpower and dynamite to dig/blast through nearly solid rock. Collect the germ-free rainwater with gutters under roof.

Use charcoal in barrels and cisterns to help remove germs.

Prevent "outhouse wastes" and "bathing germs" from getting in the drinking water by gathering water upstream from fort and bathing downstream.

When the fort's population becomes too large for the water hauling and cistern water systems, a steam pump and two above ground tanks (photo below) will be set up on the South Concho. This river branch will be used since fort pollutants drain into the North Concho during rains.

All information and photo this page, from papers on file at Fort Concho NHL Archives 1998. Map & Illustration by P. Backlund.

Map Key:

- = river flow
S = approximate location of Soldier's Spring
P = approximate location of Fort's steam pump & tanks
--- = the growing San Angelo
"As time went on, people from all over the world found that they could make a living, here in the San Angelo area. And when the steam pump became available in San Angelo, water was pumped out of the river and easily piped to homes and businesses. My grassland became 'people-inhabited.' The people built streets, and all kinds of buildings. And because water was much easier to get, the people began to use more of it. They planted and watered trees for beauty and comfort from the sun. Ranchers raised and watered herds of fenced-in animals. Farmers plowed the land and began to plant and water crops.

Sadly, during all this progress, mesquite trees became more common than the grasses. And so my river's grassland changed all around me and this affected my river," she said.

Grasses are special because their fibrous roots allow rainwater to soak into the soil easily. Less water runs off into the river and so also, less dirt goes into the river. Rainwater in grasslands easily trickles into the aquifers. The aquifer's springs release clean water into the river. Native grass roots are at best only 8 feet deep, so when a drought comes along, they do not rob water from an aquifer. Instead, the whole plant just goes dormant.

Trees, bushes and weeds with taproots all allow more runoff of rain into rivers. More soil erosion takes place. The river is ferociously dirty after a rain, and then the water continues to flow to the Gulf of Mexico's ocean water. It doesn't remain here where we need it. Less water gets into the aquifers and what limited water does reach the aquifer, can be stolen by the taproots. Plus, the 40 gallons of water that is required to make one pound of mesquite wood, could have been put to better use in making grasses that cattle can eat or crops that can be sold. Mesquite trees cause most aquifers to leak less water. The rivers dry up.
Progress and available piped water caused the city to grow. Progress can be seen in the building of the Chadbourne Street Bridge in 1912 (left above). The present day four-lane Chadbourne Street Bridge (right above) was built in the mid-1960s. There was even an unsuccessful experiment with street cars on Chadbourne Street in 1908 (middle photo). All three photos are looking north. Both pavement and mesquite trees prevent water from seeping into the ground and joining the aquifers (opposite page).

(bottom left) This Tom Green Courthouse existed from 1885-1927 and the inset, the first Tom Green County Courthouse is dated 1883. (bottom right) Surrounding the current Tom Green County Courthouse (1927-present) are probably some of the same trees planted in the mid-1880s.
Dezzerae made ripples in the water with a long stick she had found. The ripples in the still water made her sleepy.

The subject was changed. "Do either of you know what a dam is?"

Haley said proudly, "Beavers block a river with wood to make a dam."

"Very good, Haley! Beavers make a natural dam, but people also make dams. Dirt, stone, wood or concrete dams were made along the river and its creeks for storage. Dammed water irrigated crops or watered livestock, or was piped to the entire growing city," she said.

"But dams can be a problem," she continued. "They slow the flow of the water."

"Slow and shallow means stinky," Dezzerae remembered.

"Yes, and dams collect sediment. Dams prevent 'cleansing rains' from cleaning the river."
Small man-made or nature-made dams (upper left) such as this near the Carlin's Ranch probably supplied water for both gardens and livestock. Irrigation dams (below) allowed farmers to consistently raise crops. (Both photos circa early 1900s).

"Lake Concho Dam" (left) was built in 1891 on the South Concho. It was intended to generate electricity, but wasn't successful. Located by Lone Wolf Bridge built in 1888, the dam's 18 foot height collects water for the current Water Treatment Plant. The photo (below) of Lone Wolf Bridge (rebuilt in 1922), the dam and the Fire Training Tower was taken from the roof of the Concho Power Plant of WTU in 1998.

Top three photos: West Texas Collection, ASU
Bottom photo: Pam Backlund
"As the human population went up, the need for dams, water treatment and sewage disposal occurred," she said.

Tom Green County
Population:
1920 = 15,210
1930 = 36,033
1940 = 39,304

1. Chemicals disinfect the water and cause particles to clump.
2. The big particles in the water are allowed to sink to the bottom of the settling tanks. The cleaner water from the top is pumped to the filters.
3. Filtering was begun in 1923, using charcoal, sand and gravel. Beginning in 1997, however, the water is filtered through granulated carbon only.
4. Chlorine, begun in 1929, is added to kill any remaining germs.
5. The clean water is stored in tanks.
6. The clean water goes to homes and businesses.
7. The waste water goes down the drain through separate pipes to the Sewage Treatment Plant.

San Angelo Water Treatment Plant

Photo taken from Lone Wolf Bridge (looking north in 1998). This Treatment Plant was built in 1929. The Concho Power Plant was demolished in 1998.
What presently happens to sewage? (near FM 380)

The solid wastes are separated from the liquid and after being dewatered with belt presses are brought to the City Landfill, (about 8 dump trucks per day).

The liquid wastewater which accounts for 99.9% of raw sewage is aerated and processed. It has irrigated the City Farm for many years. In mid-August 1998, this effluent water became available to private farmers who had previously used Lake Nasworthy water for irrigation.

What happened to sewage in the past?

The early pioneers of Texas, used “outhouses” or “privies”. See if you can find 3 outhouses in the picture of downtown San Angelo on page 11 of this booklet. At some point in time, underground holes, called “cesspools” or “septic tanks” began to be used, mostly by those living outside city limits.

In 1895, the first “sewer line” was laid along Chadbourne Street and a few businesses were hooked up to it. More pipes were laid as the city grew. From 1895 to about 1927, sewage was managed by both the privately owned Lasker Company and then San Angelo Sewer Company which was located at the end of Magdalen Street. Part of the latter’s foundation/settling tanks are still visible behind Western Mattress by the river. Though records are hard to find, most likely the raw sewage was separated there, with the wastewater being dumped into the North Concho River near present day Johnson Dam. Disgusting as it may be, communities throughout the world customarily got rid of wastes into the nearest river during those years.

From 1927 to 1958, the City controlled the sewage treatment with a new plant northeast of Bell Street Crossing. The solids were brought to the landfill and the wastewater was used to irrigate crops. Because there weren’t adequate holding ponds for the growing city, sometimes some of the wastewater was released into the Main Concho River. During the 1950s, citizens complained about the odors of the plant. They wanted the plant moved.

In 1958, the plant relocated to an “out of town” area on FM 380. At this site, the wastewater has not been released into the river for many, many years. Two very large holding ponds contain the wastewater until it can be pumped for irrigation. During a short drought in the 1970s, it was proposed to treat the wastewater further so that it could be sanitary enough for human consumption. Tertiary Treatment, as this is called, was voted down by city officials because it was and is a very expensive process. Many citizens didn’t like the idea because it was just too offensive to consider.
“However, there are many benefits from dams. Water storage and beauty are two,” she continued.

“Some dams can help electric power plants. In San Angelo dammed water cools the steam of the generators. In other places, dammed water can actually create electricity.”

“Finally, if a dam is big enough, it can prevent ‘killing and destroying’ floods. I lived through three really bad floods in 1882, 1906 and 1936.”

The top photo, was taken from Oakes Street Bridge, looking north during the flood of 1906. (Courtesy of West Texas Collection, ASU)
The bottom photo was taken from the same location in 1998. Arrows in the photo refer to the photographers’ locations for pictures found on page 28 of this booklet.

The 1940s map below depicts San Angelo as it looked with only one lake.
Key to Lake Nasworthy:

a. Gun Club Road
b. ← to San Angelo
c. To airport →
d. San Angelo Nature Center
e. Original Middle Concho river bed
f. Original South Concho river bed

Nasworthy Dam, completed in 1930, was the first major dam of San Angelo. West Texas Utilities in 1950 sold Lake Nasworthy and the whole water system to the city for $4.98 million. The dam's floodgates can be seen at the end of Beatty Road off of Knickerbocker Road. The photo (above) taken in 1952, shows the affects that the drought had on San Angelo's only major water source of that time.

Also built during the Depression (1930s):
Oakes Street Bridge, still currently in use;
Johnson Dam, east of Oakes Street Bridge;
1st Street Dam by Central High School;
6th Street Dam, under the Houston-Harte Expressway;
Paved River Drive traveling along the North Concho;
Civic League Park by Central High School.
"San Angelo has three large dams now and doesn't have to worry about flooding. The big dams were needed but they changed the river in big ways. The water flows very little now. And 'cleansing rains' just don’t have a chance to cleanse anymore."

All photos this page taken from the 15th floor of the Cactus Hotel.

**Upper** (1936)
Looking east at the Central Fire Station.
Note the number of trees as compared to the picture of Fort Concho in 1886 on page 11.

**Middle** (1936)
Oakes Street Bridge and Chadbourne Bridge looking south.

**Lower** (1998)
Oakes Street Bridge and Chadbourne Bridge and River Stage
In 1936, "25 inches of rain fell in 4 days" causing the flood of all floods to hit San Angelo. According to the San Angelo Standard-Times, 38 houses smashed into the Chadbourne Street Bridge. (See photos opposite page).

This flood caused people to want yet another dam, this one to control the North Concho River. The **O.C. Fisher Dam**, (formerly called the North Concho Dam), though needed much sooner, wasn't completed till the early 1950s. World War II caused its delay.

O.C. Fisher Reservoir in the aerial photo taken in 1951, above, slowly began to fill with water. But between 1950 and 1956 the worst recorded drought of Texas occurred. In fact, 94% of Texas' counties, including Tom Green County were declared "disaster areas" because of so little rain.

This drought worried everyone and caused uneasy officials to lobby for the building of **Twin Buttes Dam**. Once called the Three Rivers Dam, it was completed in the early 1960s and forms Twin Buttes Reservoir. It lies southwest of and feeds into Lake Nasworthy.

**Key:**

a. O.C. Fisher Reservoir  
b. North Concho River, flowing toward San Angelo  
c. O.C. Fisher Dam  
d. Soccer Fields  
e. Mercedes Street  
f. Arden Road  
g. Race track  
h. Stock tank (earthen dam on runoff creek)  
i. "The Bluffs" and  
j. "Highland Range" both housing developments  
k. San Angelo State Park  
l. Red Arroyo Spillway
Two rollerbladers skated past the kids who, by now, were wondering why no one else seemed to notice the talking mermaid.

Finally, Dezzerac had the courage to ask, "How can a statue talk? Why are you telling us this story?"

She replied, "Everyone needs to know the river’s story because the river is in a bit of trouble now. So many people like to live in San Angelo and all of them, even you kids, affect and sometimes hurt the river. Cars on streets drip toxic chemicals which flow into the river during a rain. People put fertilizers and chemicals on their yards and much of it ends up in the river because of rain."

Surprised, the children said, "But we’re not hurting the river!"

She continued, "Some people let their garbage blow away. When rains come or when winds blow, all kinds of dirt, leaves, chemicals and trash end up in the river. Most people don’t realize that they pollute the river by just living in the city. And sadly, the pollution just stays here because of the dams."
Kinds of "Non-point Source Pollution"

- gasoline and other petroleum products
- lawn and agricultural fertilizer
- insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides
- animal wastes from agriculture, pets and stray animals
- construction debris
- paints and solvents
- drained car oil, leaking oil, transmission fluids, antifreeze
- salts that de-ice highways
- sediment from erosion
- dead leaves and grass clippings
- plastic bags and other trash from overfilled trash containers
- fishing line and picnic debris
Haley had two solutions to the problem.

"If dams are the problem, then just get rid of them. If there are too many people here, then make some of them move."

But she replied.

"If we remove the dams, there could be water shortages or possibly floods.

And, Haley, who should be forced to move away from this city, you kids and your families?"

Both photos of this page were taken while standing on the Johnson Dam facing west, Oakes Bridge-foreground, Chadbourne Bridge-background.

Top photo, 1951 (courtesy WTC, ASU)
The river is low for two reasons:
1. During the early 1950s this area experienced its most memorable and financially devastating drought.
2. With the O.C. Fisher Dam nearly completed, river water from the watershed north of the dam was being trapped for the lake. River water was not being allowed to flow to this downtown location, then on to the Colorado River and on to the Gulf of Mexico. This same stretch of river, from Irving Street to the Johnson Dam was dredged in the early 1980s. Eight to ten feet of silt and debris was removed. The Celebration Bridge was built in 1993.
The lower photo was taken in 1998 by Pam Backlund.
Everything was quiet. They thought and thought. Soft raindrops began to fall.

One by one the butterflies left the mermaid for shelter. Soon only one was left. With the sun still shining, the sprinkle of raindrops would most likely stop soon. West Texas rains are like that.

But Miranda’s dad closed the book and searched the sky. Would it rain or not?

A tear rolled down the mermaid’s cheek as she softly concluded, "Take care of my living river. If you put something on the ground, it will probably end up in my waters."

A strong gust of wind then blew the remaining butterfly away. The mermaid spoke no more.

Both photos: Bruce Backlund
Events of the Celebration Bridge then became more noticeable to the children. A dog barked on the sidewalk ahead. Ten pigeons flew down from the bridge. They realized that the story had ended and that a storm was approaching. But just then, a crawdad on a bamboo bloom grabbed Dezzerae’s stick with its claw.

At the same time, Miranda’s dad decided, “It looks like rain.”
“But look, Daddy. Can we keep it?” Miranda asked while pointing.
He hesitated for a moment, as parents often do, but finally decided, “No, let’s leave it in its natural home, and we need to go home, too.”

So they let the crawdad go back into its home, the river; and they left for their homes in the city, by the river. The children told the mermaid’s story to their parents, families and friends. Everyone wondered how they learned such an important story, because no one believed that the mermaid actually spoke to them. Yet, everyone did agree that preventing litter and pollution would not be that hard to do.
How to Make a Difference

Statistic:
The average homeowner uses almost 5.3 lbs. of pesticides per year.

Therefore, all San Angelo homes and businesses combined, yearly dump approximately 30 freighter trucks of pesticides onto their yards. These pesticides can and do run off into the Concho River and its aquifers when it rains.

Solution:
Use “river-friendly” pest products instead.

All illustrations: Lower Colorado River Authority

Use landscape practices that require less water, fertilizer and pesticides.

Allow a natural buffer of at least 20 feet wide on either side of a stream or dry creek and

Compost grass clippings and leaves or use them as mulch in flower beds.

Recycle or properly dispose of used oil, paint and household chemicals; try nontoxic alternatives (baking soda, etc.) to household cleaning chemicals.

Use public transportation or carpool when possible.
During later visits, the children tried again and again to get the mermaid to speak. But the magic of the butterflies was never there again.

When you pass the welcoming mermaid of the Celebration Bridge, especially during the autumn Monarch butterfly migration, see if she will speak to you too.

But please, do what you can every day to prevent trash and debris from getting on the ground.

- Progress changed the land and the river.
- Human ingenuity can and will find a way for the city and its river to coexist beautifully.
- She thought she was the keeper of the river, but we are the keepers of the river.
- She spoke of our river.

Photo: Bruce Backlund
Practices that can improve water quality

- Use of settling ponds to slow stormwater runoff and trap pollutants.
- Reduction of unnecessary impervious cover (pavement).
- Containment and treatment of runoff from feedlots.
- Prudent use of pesticides and fertilizers.
- Maintenance of vegetated buffers on stream banks.
- Limiting the amount of area disturbed during construction and using silt fences to capture eroded soil during construction.
- Use of contour plowing and terracing where applicable.
- Establishment of grass filter strips along fields.
- Limiting livestock access along steep slopes and stream banks.

This page courtesy of the Lower Colorado River Authority
How has progress affected the river?

- Progress
  I. When water was drawn from river
  II. When water was drawn from aquifers
  III. When trees were planted in the grassland
  IV. When buildings and pavement were added
  V. When small dams were built
  VI. When large dams were built
  VII. When San Angelo grew in a south west direction

- How it helps people
  Collecting rainwater in cisterns was no longer necessary.
  Water was accessible nearly anywhere and seldom had germs.
  The land became cooler, more comfortable, and beautiful for humans.
  Personal belongings stayed cleaner, roads were safer. Everything was more convenient.
  Water for drinking, crops, animals, and cooling of power plants became available.
  Water was stored for droughts. Floods were prevented. New kinds of recreation arose.
  Red Arroyo and Lake Nasworthy became settled by people.

- How it affects the river
  As populations increase, the need for dams arises.
  As populations increase, some springs feeding the river dry up.
  Trees soak up rain that would have joined the aquifers. Springs dry up.
  Less rain soaks into the aquifers because it runs into the river, picking up dust, silt, and "whatever" along the way. Springs dry up. More pollution accumulates in the river.
  Water speed and amount is reduced below the dam. Sediment collects above the dam. Toxins accumulate.
  Sediments, no longer pushed away with cleansing rains, stagnate and may require periodic dredging for removal.
  The downtown stretch of the North Concho is visited less often.

What is being done to help the river?

I. and II. The Texas Water Development Board was established to make sure that aquifers and rivers are shared fairly. Also the board is looking into future water needs of the growing state.

III. Listed are some agencies who are researching the mesquite’s impact on aquifers and how to get rid of mesquite: UCRA (Upper Colorado River Authority), Texas A&M Research & Extension Service, Texas State & Soil Conservation Service. Also: Texas Parks and Wildlife, US Dept. of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service.

IV. Building contractors must prevent erosion at building sites. Some cities require new construction to have “rain absorption areas” in order to allow more water to get to aquifers. The building of “storm holding ponds” will allow dirty runoff rainwater to settle out before being transferred to the river.

V. and VI. The city may have to dredge portions of the river occasionally. In 1997, the Water Treatment Plant installed a carbon filtering system.

VII. In 1980, the city organized the River Corridor Commission which began development of the North Concho River. The river from Irving Street to the Johnson Dam was dredged. Pumps, aerators and falls were added. Many structures and programs arose because of concerned citizens, the UCRA, the City and its River Corridor Commission:
  1. River Stage and River Walk
  2. Paseo de Santa Angela
  3. Celebration Bridge
  4. San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts
  5. Fiesta del Concho
  6. Christmas Light Tour
  7. restoration of downtown buildings
  8. forming of the Recycling Center
  9. UCRA River Dev. Master Plan
  10. forming of the Adopt-a-Spot cleanup program
  11. eventual dredging of Lake Nasworthy
The Actors of the Celebration Bridge Photos:

Dezzerae Ross, daughter of Letizia Cole
Haley Rainwater, son of Temple Rainwater
Miranda Munoz, daughter of Daniel and Esther Munoz
Daniel Munoz, PE Coach at Day Elementary School

About the Author: Pam Backlund is a member of the Friends of the River, Public Education Committee. She teaches Biology at Central HS. "Had it not been for my sons’ insistence in going to the Celebration Bridge one Sunday afternoon (in September), I might never have been inspired to write this story. Special thanks to Bruce, my husband for taking pictures for me and giving me constant support. And to my sons, Ben-for cooking meals when I couldn’t; Daniel-for positioning the props on and around the mermaid (while in a kayak) for the photos; Joseph-for being a rollerblader on page 26; Alan-for being a rollerblader on page 26; Thomas-for letting me borrow his butterfly collection."

About the painter of Twin Buttes and the mermaid tear:
Jackie Parker has won various awards in San Angelo for her works. Her mother, Barbara Parker teaches Art at Central HS and has been involved with teaching youth for many years.

About the illustrator of the coloring poster mermaid:
Celeste Seay lives in Austin, Texas and works at the Lower Colorado River Authority. She has had an interest in drawing mermaids and in riverland stewardship for a very long time.

Outside Back Cover: The San Angelo Wheelmen
Courtesy of the West Texas Collection, ASU.
The photo was taken circa early 1900s, facing Oakes Street Bridge. Insert: 1998 version of Oakes Street and the Celebration Bridges. Mermaid drawing by Celeste Seay.

Inside Back Cover: South view from the Cactus Hotel taken Dec. 29, 1997 by Bruce Backlund with permission from Johnny Ross, owner of the "Cactus Club" 15th floor of the hotel.

References:

Literature:
The Concho Country, by Gus Clemens; Mulberry Press, San Angelo, 1981. This book excited me about this region’s history and is an irreplacable part of my library.
Old Angelo, by Joe A. Gibson; The Minuteman Press, San Angelo, 1971. This book has a wealth of photos and history. It encouraged me to create a pictorial history.
The San Angelo Standard-Times, various articles (a complete list available) This newspaper, undoubtedly is the most consistent source of San Angelo’s written history. Thanks to Standard-Times librarian, Edna Sedeno.

Personal Interviews: Suzanne Campbell and Tanya Lee, of the West Texas Collection (ASU); Evelyn Lemons, of Fort Concho National Historic Landmark; Fred Teagarden, of SK Engineering; Ellen Groth, of the UCRD; Ethel and Eugene Berger, my parents; Michael Williams, a city surveyor; Ron Raiz of the Water/Sewage Treatment Plant; Shannon McWilliams of Good Riddance Environmental Pest Control.

Photograph Sources: Tom Green County Historical Society, Fort Concho NHL, West Texas Collection of ASU, Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (for the illustration on p. 31), Annie and Albert Berger (my grandparents), Rodney Barta of TCA Cable, (who climbed the TCA Tower), Jackie Parker, (for painting the Twin Buttes prairie p.5), Barbara Parker (for painting the mermaid tear p.33), Celeste Seay (for her mermaid drawing), Lower Colorado River Authority (for illustrations), Bruce & Pam Backlund (all other 1997-98 photos).

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