

Copyright 2005 THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
November 27, 2005 Sunday
SECOND EDITION

SECTION: LIFESTYLES - SUNDAY LIFE; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 2465 words

HEADLINE: THE SOURCE The Rio Grande exerts a powerful pull right from the start

SERIES: THE CALL OF THE RIVER

BYLINE: BEATRIZ TERRAZAS , Staff Writer

BODY:

CREEDE, Colo. - Here at the Continental Divide, more than 12,000 feet above sea level, the water whispers from beneath patches of melting snow. Drops bead together into tiny trickles that grow into bubbling rivulets and pass through purple, yellow and red flowers. Coaxed by gravity, the trickles become streams that flow down the hillsides below Colorado's Stony Pass. They rush around rocks and shrubs and cut paths through snow caves. They spill over rocky cliffs and crash to the ground below: waterfalls.

In the valley below, the waters merge in a symphony: This is the Rio Grande, legendary river of books, movies and controversy. It roars as it forges ahead on its journey to the sea.

Writers, artists and photographers have long sought to capture its soul. Paul Horgan's book, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History*, won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1955. More than 50 years later, the fascination continues. This year, Texas author Jan Reid compiled *Rio Grande*, an anthology about the river.

I grew up along the Texas-Mexico border, in the El Paso area, and am no less drawn to it, no less fascinated by it. The river was the playground of my youth, the spot for high-school bonfires. It was the muddy line that designated me as an American and my cousins as Mexican. And yet there has always been some other force I associate with the river, something I've never been able to name. Despite our best efforts, it seems to defy those of us who seek to unravel its mystery.

The Rio Grande, or El Rio Bravo del Norte, as the Mexicans know it, is the third-longest river in the U.S. But it's a lean river. It's too shallow and narrow to serve as a commercial waterway. Water rights, border violence, illegal immigration - these issues all keep the river in the news, but usually as a minor character. The river itself is often ignored or misunderstood. Yet, for some communities, it continues to be the center of existence.

In July, photographer Erich Schlegel and I launched a series of journeys along the Rio Grande's 1,900-mile path in hopes of tapping into the mystery of the river's call. Erich, too, grew up along the river, in Brownsville. As a child, the river was a forbidden place - a place full of hidden dangers. So he shared my curiosity about it.

We began in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, following the water through New Mexico to Texas, where it separates nations. We floated through the Spartan beauty of the Big Bend area, drove to South Texas and ended our travels at Playa Bagdad, the Mexican beach where the river empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

We shared meals, car rides and river rafts with the people we met along the river. They invited us into their lives and shared their stories and passions about the Rio Grande. Through their eyes, we began to see the river in a different way. And we began to examine our own ties to the river and the way it has shaped our lives.

Welcome to Creede

On a map, draw a line east from Stony Pass and you hit Creede, in Mineral County, the first town on the river east of the Continental Divide. Roughly 95 percent of the land in Mineral County is forest. The county's population is about 900, with half of it in Creede. But it swells to a few thousand in the spring and summer months. Creede, with a cool elevation of some 8,500 feet, is a springboard for tourists.

The town has small galleries, outfitters and gift shops. You can eat pizza at Mac's Old Mine or fish tacos at Kip's Grill. You can even have steak or lamb right on the river at the Antlers Rio Grande Lodge's restaurant.

One night, we sit at the Tommyknocker Tavern in town and listen to the band: "I see the bad moon rising. I see trouble on the way. ... Don't go around tonight. Well it's bound to take your life. There's a bad moon on the rise."

There was a time when the Creedence Clearwater Revival song could have been Creede's anthem. While people have always been fishing and hunting here, mining put Creede on the map. When silver was discovered in the late 1800s, the population ballooned to 10,000.

In those days, the town's residents were as wild and free as the river must have been before dams and irrigation. Among the residents were Calamity Jane, Jesse James and Bob Ford, the saloon owner who ended the gunslinger's days with a bullet to the head.

But the mining era ended in the mid-1980s, and for the past two decades, the town has focused on tourism. Creede's outlaw days are over. The wildest thing that happens tonight in Tommyknocker's is when the singer croons "Happy Birthday" to a woman. Right in the middle of the song he shouts: "Show us your panties!"

The mountain man

At the intersection of Creede's Main Street and State Highway 149 is a set of buildings with a sign: "Mountain Man Tours." One morning, we are among 40 or so guests being fitted with life jackets for a raft ride on the river.

We put in seven miles above Creede. This part of the river is strong, clear and wide. The water is green; this is not the brown river I'm used to seeing along the border. And it's cold - "about 49 degrees or so, 48 maybe," says our guide, Greg Coln.

Greg is the "man" in Mountain Man Tours. For 20 years, he and his wife, Delen, have been rafting visitors along the upper Rio Grande.

Greg is tall, thin and has a wide, gap-toothed smile and a permanent relaxed stoop from years of paddling. He seems to carry the river in every line of his body. The fluid motion of his arms and hands as he works the oars in slow, sure circles mimics the graceful flow of the river beneath us.

Delen told me earlier that when river guides train with Greg, they quickly discover whether they have the two traits needed for this job. One is a tenderness for the river, a "gentleness of spirit." The other is the toughness that enables them to say to the river, "I'm in charge, and you're not going to take me over."

Greg has both. His sweet nature borders on corny: He says an old Indian taught him how to call a beaver out of his lodge and instructs us to be quiet. Then he leans out of the raft and shouts, "Here, beaver!"

But beneath the soft, Southern drawl and gentle ways lies a tough core. He is Mineral County's river search-and-rescue and is intimately familiar with the river's changing flow, its fluctuating moods and energy.

A couple of weeks earlier, he plucked a man out of the river where he was trapped between his boat and a bridge. When the man heard someone yelling, "Grab my hand!" he was certain it was God. "You're a long ways from God," Greg said as he hauled the fellow out.

The river demands respect, says Greg. "You can do all you can, but the river does what it wants with you. If it wants to keep you, it'll keep you, and if it wants to spit you out and give you another chance, it will. Even as many times as I've been on it, you never take it for granted."

Greg grew up hiking and boating in Tennessee. As a young man he hiked the Continental Divide in Colorado with a backpack and a dog.

In his early 20s, he worked in Wichita Falls as a field engineer for a pipe systems company. Between projects, he hiked in England, Switzerland, France and Italy. But he found no place more beautiful than the Rocky Mountains.

Greg was making good money, but he was turning into a yuppie, and not a particularly happy one at that. He needed mountains, rivers and fresh air more than he needed the job. So in 1981, he locked his rental house, drove his Mercedes to the bank that held the lien, and walked away. He hitchhiked out of Texas and ended up in Creede.

He lived in the Weminuche and La Garita Wildernesses for a year and wintered in a trapper's cabin he thinks was built in the 1800s. He lived off what he could hunt and emerged in the spring to

find that the miners in Creede had placed bets on his survival. "I didn't win anything," he says. But he had earned the nickname "Mountain Man."

After a stint in the Navy, he returned to Colorado in 1985. There he met Delen, who was visiting from her native Fort Worth. Together they launched Mountain Man Tours.

River of emotions

This is a watershed year for the Rio Grande's headwaters, says Greg. He hasn't seen the river this high in 20 years. But it dropped several feet the week before our visit, and we drift along leisurely, the water sloshing gently against the raft. We float by giant spruce, aspen and fir trees. We see an old train depot that is now someone's house.

Then he angles us through a stretch that in high water is a true rapid, but now is a lazier flow around exposed boulders.

"I saw a rabbit out here running around one day," he says. "He was kind of acting funny. So I thought I'd call it Rabid Rabbit Rapids."

He has christened other landmarks: Big Bertha (a trailer-sized rock), Whale's Tail (it does look like the big mammal's tail) and Thread the Needle (a rapid that's not too scary today).

Greg knows the location of every rock, even those underwater. He knows whether the river is running faster or slower than the previous day, and how much it drops or rises from day to day. He has detailed some of the lessons he's learned from the river in his self-published book, *Tracks on the River, A River Outfitter's Perspective of Life on the Rio Grande Headwaters*.

Delen says the river is connected with our very blood flow, with the rhythm of our bodies and our minds. "The river can actually pick up our moods, it can reverse our moods," she says. An energetic river excites us, and a peaceful river calms us.

She also sees it as a parallel to our lives. It has a trajectory, a path that at times is smooth and carefree, and at others fraught with obstacles it must find a way around.

But Greg's feelings about the river are harder to define, more difficult to articulate.

"It's like somebody talking about their relationship with God or Jesus," he says. "It's something you don't know how to put into words. It's just there. It's real. And it's a part of you."

"I'll bring the kayak down, float down ... when it's a real bright moon or something," he says. "It makes it a little more exciting at night 'cause you can hear these little gurgles and stuff, and you can't see the rock 'til you're right on top of it, so you have to really maneuver fast."

"The animals come down to drink; they're not so afraid of you at night," he says. "It's a part of nature, part of God's work. It's very spiritual. Even as many times as I go down - sometimes you look back and see the light shining off the rapids behind you - it still takes your breath every time."

I ask Greg how old he is. "I am old and young at the same time," he laughs. I'd put him anywhere between 35 and 50. But then again, he says that in the mountains, time and age have little meaning.

A stranger

Next morning before sunrise, we drive our rented Jeep west from Creede on State Highway 149. We turn onto Forest Service Road 520, a gravel road that quickly becomes a rocky, bumpy four-wheel-drive trail. We cross several streams. On steep ascents we slow to 5 miles per hour.

It takes us three hours to drive the 40 or so miles to Stony Pass, the river's birthplace, in the Rio Grande National Forest. Elk tracks dot the white patches of snow, and a coyote pack yip-yaps nearby.

Even though we're above the tree line, there are peaks that dwarf us. Their beauty fills me with a tremendous sense of possibility. Suddenly, I understand what Greg was saying about the nature of time in the mountains. The terrain around us ranges from 1.8 million to 65 million years old; farther south, some of the geology is even older. By comparison, a human life is a shooting star - a blip that lights up the radar screen then blinks out.

I inhale: no car exhaust, no restaurant grease, no cologne whiffs from passers-by. The colors are deep, as if simply by being so close to the river's source they are more saturated: velvet green trees in the valley, a vibrant blue sky, dazzling white snow.

On our way back down, we see the white squiggles of dry waterfalls on the mountains. At their base, the river emerges from shadowed canyons into the sun, its bends gleaming like polished silver.

Where the river curves into an S, a man casts a fly in graceful, swirling arcs. He hooks more than a dozen cutthroat trout, their golden bodies speckled with black. As quickly as he hooks them, he slips them back into the water.

I sit on the bank and listen. As it rounds the bend, the water murmurs in a way that mimics people talking. But I don't know the language of this river.

It's not the same river whose warm, muddy bottoms I sank my toes into as a child. When I step in this river, the stones on the bottom are slick. And though the water is only up past my ankles, the current is strong and makes me feel unsteady. When I cross it, I do not emerge in a different country. Beautiful and inviting as it is, this river is a stranger I am just beginning to know.

The fisherman packs his last two catches in a plastic bag for supper and heads home.

Flowing on

The day we leave Colorado, we drive by Mountain Man Tours one more time. The sun is low, the river guides and customers are gone. But Greg is in the driveway. As if he were the river itself, we feel compelled to stop. He immediately says, "Come in!"

But we can't; it's time to move on. We promise to return.

So we drive down from the mountains into the part of Colorado where the land is a bit flatter, a bit less cool in the evenings. We pass through small towns lit up by Subway and Dairy Queen signs, by five-and-dimes and hardware stores. Once, I see a drive-in theater packed with cars, images flickering across two screens.

I think about a passage in Greg's book: "The river holds many secrets for those who take the time to listen to its whisperings. The current carves such stories along the banks in a fashion that may not be obvious to a viewer upon first glance. It takes some reflection and quiet study to understand the messages that the river has left for us. We all have the ability to unlock the secrets. The ability lies in what the eye sees, what the ear detects and what the heart comprehends."

Maybe what the water was trying to tell me earlier was simply to open my ears, to open my eyes.

As we cross into New Mexico, the highway and the air immediately feel different. I can't wait to see what tomorrow will bring.

Next week: Continue the journey with a look at lives outsiders rarely see: The Pueblo people and their ancient bond with the river.

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The Call of the River:

- Take a multimedia trip with Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel along the 1,900 miles of the Rio Grande.

- More photos, their memories and yours are available online.

THE CALL OF THE RIVER

What is the lure of the Rio Grande? Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel searched for the answer along 1,900 miles of the river, from its source to the Gulf of Mexico.

GRAPHIC: MAP(S): (DAMEON RUNNELS Staff Graphic) Rio Grande River; PHOTO(S): (ERICH SCHLEGEL/Staff Photographer) 1. Greg Coln greets friends of longtime customers at his shop in Creede. He spends much of his time on the river, but he finds it hard to put the relationship into words. "It's like somebody talking about their relationship with God or Jesus." 2. Margaret Lamb's ranching family's history has been entwined with the Rio Grande for more than 100 years.

Above, Ms. Lamb enjoys a visit with Creede resident Barry Moore. Read about Ms. Lamb at Dallasnews.com. 3. The Rio Grande cuts through the plains of the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado, near Antonito. The high-desert valley gets little rainfall but produces tens of millions of dollars in crops thanks in part to extensive irrigation from the Rio Grande. 4. Lindsay Anderson of Nashville dances with fly-fishing guide Joshua Grownes of Durango, Colo., at Tommyknockers Tavern in Creede. The mining town on the river is a springboard for tourists. 5. Water from the nearby Rio Grande is diverted into agricultural fields in Colorado's San Luis Valley, where it's distributed via circular sprinkler systems. Crops include alfalfa, clover, wheat, oats, barley and potatoes. 6. Charlie Berry of Silverton, Colo., releases a cutthroat trout into the headwaters of the Rio Grande in the Rio Grande National Forest, near Creede, Colo. 7. "Mountain Man" Greg Coln waves to a photographer on a bridge as he leads a group from a local theater camp down the Rio Grande. He was first drawn to the river in 1981. 8. ON THE COVER: At more than 12,000 feet above sea level, melting snow on Stony Pass, near Creede, Colo., is the source of the Rio Grande.

LOAD-DATE: December 14, 2005

Copyright 2005 THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
December 4, 2005 Sunday
SECOND EDITION

SECTION: LIFESTYLES - SUNDAY LIFE; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 2322 words

HEADLINE: SUSTAINING FORCE The Rio Grande has nourished the Pueblo people and the earth they farm for ages

SERIES: THE CALL OF THE RIVER

BYLINE: BEATRIZ TERRAZAS , Staff Writer

BODY:

SAN JUAN PUEBLO, N.M. - Just northwest of Taos we stand on the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge and peer at the ribbon of water 650 feet below. My hands break into a sweat; this is the site of accidents, injuries and suicides. I shudder just looking at car remnants on the canyon wall.

This is a canyon you don't see until you're almost at its lip; then, it's as if the desert had split in two, allowing the river to flow through the bottom of the chasm. It's a spectacular beginning for a stretch of river that stands witness to almost a thousand years' of Pueblo culture.

The Pueblo ancestors go back some 11,000 years. But they first began settling along the river after the 11th century, as they dispersed from New Mexico's Chaco Canyon and Colorado's Mesa Verde. But beyond history, the river has a greater, spiritual meaning. According to their beliefs, they emerged from the Earth's center through water, making lakes, rivers and streams sacred places.

In his book, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History*, Paul Horgan describes how the first people climbed up a great fir tree through a lake and emerged into the world, making all bodies of water doorways to the world below.

Water is a gateway so revered that the Pueblo people won't discuss its religious meaning with outsiders. This secretiveness is their way of preserving long-held religious traditions, some of which still take place at the river.

But as Erich Schlegel and I continue our journey along the river, they will share with us some ways in which the river embodies their past, their present and their future.

The Pueblo

We drive south from the Rio Grande Gorge to meet Herman Agoyo of San Juan Pueblo.

The pueblo, which only recently reverted to its original name, Ohkay Owingeh, is one of 19 in the state. It sits along New Mexico Highway 68, about 25 minutes north of Santa Fe.

Herman is a tribal councilman for his pueblo and one of its former governors. Most pueblos limit access by outsiders. Herman has agreed to be our guide.

At 70, Herman is lean and limber, with wire-rimmed glasses and salt-and-pepper hair. He earned a degree in physical and health education from Manhattan College through a Catholic missions program.

Just outside the pueblo, on the hillsides by the river, he shares some of his cultural past: petroglyphs carved on giant basalt boulders. The carvings of spirals, birds, people and animals date to the 1200s and the 1300s, he says, and there are thousands of them here.

"The interpretation of the spiral is recording the migration of the people," he explains. His favorite is a lion with a man's head.

"This looks like something was removed," pointing to a boulder with an unnatural wedge. Thieves sometimes steal the petroglyphs, carving out just the picture.

In one sense, I understand the temptation. There is so much history around us in this very spot that it's difficult to take it all in - the river, the man, the carvings. The urge to own a piece of history, to connect in a concrete way with the past, can be great.

I long to simply touch one of the images, to run my fingers along its thick lines. Would it be like briefly touching the person who created it so many centuries ago? But it seems disrespectful to steal even a moment that does not belong to me. So I don't.

Source of life

Some weeks earlier, Tito Naranjo of Santa Clara Pueblo explained to me the river's historical significance to the Pueblos. Tito is an author and professor of Native American studies at the University of New Mexico at Taos.

"All of the Pueblos had to have a river or a stream on which they could live, and the Pueblos who settled on the Rio Grande knew that it meant survival," he said. They grew corn, beans and squash in the river's flood plains.

"All of a sudden you could irrigate....It made the corn grow year-round, it made big corn grow, instead of the little, tiny ears that were grown on the plateaus," he explained.

The people learned to fish, and because of the river's bounty they called it "P'osongeh," which means "Great River" in Tewa, one of the Pueblo languages, he said.

"We had huge groves of cottonwood trees," he said. The flood plain was "expansive and rich in wildlife along the river bottoms...deer living along the Rio Grande, small game living along the Rio Grande. You had all kinds of birds and wildlife that was used for food and ceremonial purpose."

Then the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, marking an era of conquest, slavery and spiritual turmoil for the Pueblos.

"Everything...changed"

Nora Naranjo-Morse, Tito's sister and a well-known artist and documentary filmmaker, shared a story passed on to her about the Spanish conquest: When the Spanish arrived among the Pueblos, they rounded up the people and took them to the river. Priests cut long branches from the cottonwoods, dipped them in the river, and christened the people into a new religion. The people rolled in the dirt, trying to remove what they had been christened with.

"When I heard that story I was so affected by it, because they had no escape," said Nora. "...Their concept of everything, including their relationship to the water, changed."

Today, the river, too, has been altered, dammed and straightened by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said Tito. They "just dehydrated the flood plain...killed the whole ecosystem."

Add to that the opening of Los Alamos National Laboratory in the 1940s, and what you have is the destruction of a culture, he said.

"All the Pueblo people gave up their subsistent way of life to become wage workers. America...dropped a cultural bomb on northern New Mexico before they dropped it on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They killed a way of life."

Across the road from the petroglyphs I can see the river, its brown waters stretching under the sun. It splits San Juan Pueblo in half, east and west. In New Mexico, the ever-spreading tamarisk, or salt cedar, begins to choke off the plant life along the river. The invasive tree was brought to this country from Eurasia in the early 1800s and planted along rivers and streambeds to prevent erosion.

But here I still see giant cottonwood trees blanketing the side of the road. I wonder how much farther we'll travel before we see salt cedar forests.

And I wonder: How much of Pueblo history have the land, banks and the water absorbed? As the river flows south, does it carry all this with it, imbuing everything it touches downstream with the heartbreak of a people?

Farming and family

When I first called Herman to introduce myself, I asked whether Pueblo youth value the river as their ancestors did, if it has the same meaning for them.

"I think we're failing in that because hardly anybody farms anymore," he said. "So you can see a disintegration of the family unity because families don't get together, and relatives don't get together to help plant and nurture the field. So the young people today don't have the same kind of experience that I had.

"I still farm, and I'm giving some of my children, especially the boys, some experience in farming, but not the same extent that I was involved," he said.

This evening he and his grandson Jordan Agoyo, 16, irrigate Herman's garden near the river. He has several plots of vegetables, and just adjacent are his horse pastures. One horse has broken through the fence and is galloping wide circles around us, apparently glad to be running in the cooling air.

Rio Grande water flows from a lateral ditch toward the fields of chiles, beans, squash and melons struggling against the heat, grasshoppers and elk that threaten to annihilate them. With a hoe and shovel, Herman and Jordan cut channels in the garden borders, using the soil to dam and direct the flow. Water, the sacred flow that brought their people to the Earth's surface, now feeds their tomatoes, cabbages and cauliflowers.

"This is yellow sweet corn." Herman points to some stunted stalks. "It looks like they might make it. Water comes from six or seven miles..." He pauses. "Hear that? That's a pheasant. That's what I like to hear when I come in the morning. The birds and the pheasants and, of course, the elk bull is bugling. This group of elk that's coming has some little ones. If they come tonight you can see their tracks in the mud."

Tradition lives

Next morning, we meet Bertha and Louie Burck, also from San Juan Pueblo. Every summer morning, their grandson Johnny Sanchez, 9, arrives at their house wiping sleep from his eyes. He hops in the bed of the pickup truck with the herding dogs and rides to the river bottom to help his grandparents feed the cows. Afterward, they tend the garden.

This morning we ride along with them to the spot where the Chama River empties into the Rio Grande. The Chama is its main tributary in New Mexico.

The energy in this spot is palpable - two powerful forces converging into something bigger, stronger. Where the rivers actually collide, the Rio Grande pushes against the Chama's incoming flow, forming a curve of ripples in the merging waters. There's a faint line where the Chama's lighter brown currents butt against the darker, clearer Rio Grande.

We explore the wedge of land between the two rivers, Bertha pointing out the geese, elk and cow tracks. She is 73 and tiny, with green-gray eyes. She wears jeans, boots and a scarf over her head, and walks with a quiet energy that reminds me of the river: It might look still, but underneath, there's motion.

She loves her cows so much that market time makes her cry, she says. "They're like one of my kids."

Sometimes they're on the other side of the river, and the dogs swim across to get them. Once, one of the dogs was almost carried off by the current, says Bertha. "Could have ended up in Mexico."

Johnny explodes in laughter. "You could have been a Mexican dog!" he says to the dog. "You would have had to learn to chase Mexican cows!"

The next day, as they work in the garden, Bertha prompts her grandson to explain their spring planting ritual: "What do we do?"

"We ask Mother Earth to bless our seeds?" he says.

"Mother Earth, here we are again with our seeds," she helps him out. "Give us a good garden so we can be strong and healthy and hard-working.

"You have Mother Earth, the Water Serpent and the Sun," she says. The Water Serpent is the river, called awayui in Tewa, she explains. "Without those, this wouldn't be here. But you have to have two cents' worth of hard work somewhere in there.

"Here we go, 'jito, a little eggplant," she says to him. "It's a cute little thingy."

To watch the two working together is to watch years of wisdom and cultural heritage pour from the woman to the boy.

"It makes me real proud for him to be that young and show that kind of interest," Bertha told me earlier. "My heart is this big," she gestured.

But Johnny, a self-professed junk-food lover, admits he doesn't like to eat the vegetables he grows.

Maybe one day he'll enjoy them, I suggest. "Maybe one day," he says. "But I know one thing: It's not today."

The connection

We leave the Pueblos on a warm afternoon, driving down Interstate 25. Along the way, we will meet other folks with connections to the river, including a man who rescues the river's endangered silvery minnow.

That evening, we arrive at the north end of Elephant Butte Lake in southern New Mexico. This lake, where I had my first sailboat ride, was always full during my childhood.

But the water volume has decreased every year due to drought and overuse upriver. The lake's capacity is more than 2 million acre-feet of water, but last year it held just 89,000 acre-feet. This summer, it rebounded to about 690,000 acre-feet.

In the waning light, we see white cliffs rise from the middle of the water. Shore grasses ripple gold and green. With deep rumbles, a storm breaks out northwest of the lake. The wind brings us the sweet smell of rain, but it stays dry where we are.

Before we left San Juan Pueblo, Herman shared a poem he wrote about the Rio Grande, "River Voice Card." It was published a few years ago in Discover a Watershed: The Rio Grande/Rio Bravo.

It reads in part:

"To us you are P'oekay (strong water)

You are the source of life and joy....

You are avayui (sacred water serpent).

You fed our sacred springs, ponds and wells.

Because of you Ohkay Owingeh (Village of the Strong People) was born.

Because of you, we are still connected to our place of birth and emergence."

Will I ever connect in a deep way to the river I knew growing up? To me it was just a dark swirl of waters on whose banks we picnicked. Once, it nearly swallowed my mother whole as she swam. Aside from that fearful memory, I have never explored any deep, personal emotions I might have for the river.

Yet tonight, I find myself hoping that the Hermans and the Berthas of the Pueblos succeed - that the seeds of respect and hope and honor for the river take root and grow in their grandchildren. That those children pass along that bit of heritage to their own offspring.

Just east of the reservoir, a slice of fire shimmers on a mountaintop. In a few minutes, the moon is wholly visible, a silver medallion reflected in the water below.

Next week: The heartbreak and the promise of the "forgotten river" that divides Texas and Mexico.

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THE CALL OF THE RIVER

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for the answer along 1,900 miles of the river,

from its source to the Gulf of Mexico.

In Part 2 of this four-part series, they get a rare look inside the lives of the Pueblo people.

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"Mother Earth,

here we are again

with our seeds.

Give us a good garden so we can be strong and healthy and hard-working."

Bertha Blunck,

helping her grandson

with their spring

planting ritual

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): (1-7 Photography by ERICH SCHLEGEL) 1. Bertha Burck and husband Louie ride through their ranch in San Juan Pueblo, N.M. The Rio Grande and the Chama River, the Rio Grande's major tributary in New Mexico, come together near their home. The water, sun and earth sustain them. "But you have to have two cents' worth of hard work somewhere in there," Bertha says. 2. There are petroglyphs by the thousands on the Pueblo lands. These off Highway 582 are a stone's throw from the Rio Grande. The artwork was etched in the rock by the Pueblo people around the 1200s. 3. U.S. Fish & Wildlife biologist Mike Hatch holds a crawfish with an endangered silvery minnow in its claws. He is working in New Mexico to save the silvery minnow, which is found in the waters of the Rio Grande. 4. Herman Agoyo, a tribal councilman and former governor of San Juan Pueblo, irrigates his plot of land with water diverted from the Rio Grande. With his hoe, he opens and closes channels, letting the water fill a row, then moving to the next. He hopes to pass down to his children and grandchildren an appreciation and respect for the river. 5. Mr. Hatch (center behind net) goes through a catch taken out of a canal off the Rio Grande in the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. Visit DallasNews.com to read more about him and his quest to save the endangered silvery minnow. 6. New Mexico artist Roger Montoya paints an oil rendition of the Rio Grande off Highway 68 south of Pilar. According to Pueblo beliefs, the people emerged from the Earth's center through water, making lakes, rivers and streams sacred. 7. Bertha

Burck (with her grandson Johnny Sanchez, 9) was born and raised in San Juan Pueblo, N.M.
(COVER) MAP(S): San Juan Pueblo

LOAD-DATE: December 14, 2005

Copyright 2005 THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
December 11, 2005 Sunday
SECOND EDITION

SECTION: LIFESTYLES - SUNDAY LIFE; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 2500 words

HEADLINE: Clinging to a WOUNDED RIVER The same Rio Grande that breaks hearts can renew souls

SERIES: THE CALL OF THE RIVER

BYLINE: BEATRIZ TERRAZAS , Staff Writer

BODY:

EL PORVENIR, Mexico - We're driving east from El Porvenir when a police officer with an automatic weapon over his shoulder stops us. It's a reminder that, as photographer Erich Schlegel and I continue our journey along the Rio Grande, we've arrived at the place where it divides two countries. Authorities in both are equally watchful of people wandering along their borders.

The policeman and city official with him look dubiously at our shiny, rented SUV. They've been inspecting the damage to the dirt highway caused by last night's storm, the official says. "The arroyos destroyed the road."

When we say we plan to drive roughly 130 miles to Ojinaga, across from Presidio, he says, "I don't think you're going to make it." This is our first insight into the sad stretch of the Rio Grande nicknamed the "forgotten river."

From Colorado to El Paso, the Rio Grande is dammed and diverted. By the time it leaves the El Paso-Juarez area, its water has been all but completely drained for agricultural and industrial use. All that's left is irrigation runoff. Between Texas' Fort Hancock and Presidio, or Chihuahua's El Porvenir and Ojinaga, this depleted channel is hidden in expansive forests of invasive tamarisk, or salt cedar. No true highway offers access to it on either side. Below Fort Hancock, at Fort Quitman, the river dries up each summer growing season. International security issues, a river that's virtually erased off the map and a lack of jobs have left this strip of Mexico a scattering of ghost towns.

From here through Big Bend National Park, the river is very different from the one in Colorado where it flowed cold and energetic, and from the one in New Mexico where it has given the Pueblos life. We are about to experience a river of contrasts that range from desperate and struggling to hopeful and vibrant. And our feelings will mirror the state of the river.

'Valley of tears'

The policeman waves us off.

Our guide is Alberto Torres, an imposing man of 80 and a former mayor of Juarez. He's an accountant by trade but has a large ranch farther up the road, and his driver today is Jorge Garcia, his foreman.

Alberto loves the river and feels a deep compassion for the people who live here. He has warned us of what lies ahead, calling it "a valley of misery, a valley of tears."

We follow Jorge's truck along the road, large puddles sucking at our tires. Ironically, the river that is normally dry this time of year has swollen with late August rains. Here and there a bony cow or horse grazes near the road. We pass one abandoned village after another where one or two people cling like ghosts to a former life.

In El Cuervo, meaning "the crow," Aurelia Lozoya, 70, lives in a tidy house with packed-earth floors. It sits on a hill from which we see the whole town. She and her husband are El Cuervo's lone residents, she says. "People had to leave because there's no work."

She points to a flooded alfalfa field across the road, saying that the river has "broken" again, making agriculture impossible. "Take a picture so they can see that it's a ruin," she tells Erich.

I can't see the river from here, but I know it's in that broad, green band of salt cedar to our north. While it's too flooded to walk there now, we explored the river's edge near Fort Hancock yesterday. The trees have eroded the banks in many areas, allowing water to seep out into the desert, bringing more tree seeds to sprout and take root in fields and low-lying areas. Showing us the damage on her ranch moved one rancher to tears.

Salt cedars are perpetually thirsty; a mature tree can guzzle up to 200 gallons of water a day. And they release a salt that makes it difficult for anything else to grow in their place - assuming you can remove them.

Making a living here is near impossible. But after 32 years by the river, Aurelia can't imagine calling any other place home. Her husband was born here, she explains.

"No nos falta nada, gracias a mi padre Dios," she says. Thanks to God, they lack nothing. She traps songbirds in handmade cages and sells them to fishermen as pets for 100 pesos each. Sometimes, those same fishermen bring scraps of food for her dogs.

Jorge grew up around here, too. Under the bare hoops of the school's basketball court, he recalls the baseball games among the towns. I try to picture kids running bases on the desert sand, but it's hard when the floor of the one-room schoolhouse is covered with mud. Desks and benches are piled haphazardly against a wall, and plastic busts of Mexican heroes lie face down on the floor.

An exodus

As we drive on, we traverse a 100-yard stretch of water that rises to our headlights. On the other side, a family with three kids waits for someone to help them across. Their truck is piled high with clothes, household furnishings and the family dog.

The kids' mother, Berta Lopez Jaquez, tells me they live in Lomas de Arena, another town where "there are no teachers anymore." They're moving to El Porvenir for the school year.

Jorge links a chain between his truck and theirs to haul them across the flooded road. Alberto points at the water swirling slowly at our feet. "There's more water coming from the river," he says with a trace of bitterness. "Es un abandono total este rio." The river is in a state of total neglect.

Part of the reason for the exodus has roots in international water treaties, says Alberto. While Mexico is accorded 60,000 acre-feet of water per year from the Rio Grande, Mexicans are prohibited from damming the river for agricultural use until it reaches Coahuila. There the Rio Conchos replenishes it. Still, some desperate farmers pump the water illegally.

Security issues that came up after 9-11 also hurt the people here. Before, Mexican cowboys on horseback could cross the river without fear of being penalized, to round up cattle that strayed. Now, they either have to travel for hours to the port of entry at El Porvenir or Ojinaga, or cross the river under cover of night. The same goes for Mexicans who have permits to work in Texas.

Listening to all of this makes life along the forgotten river seem hopeless.

Earlier this summer, Nora-Naranjo Morse of Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico told us that she has come to see the river as "a person, as alive." She called it "a metaphor" for our lives. "'Cause when the water is ill, maybe we're ill."

I consider the shells of the towns we've seen, and it seems that simple: Where the river is broken, so are the lives along it.

Still alive

But the next evening, I realize it's not that simple. We arrive at a small ranch in Ojos Calientes to an oasis of color, sound and aromas. Ruben Porras has butchered a hog to celebrate his daughter's fifth birthday, and several families have come to the party.

There's the occasional bang! of a balloon popping and screams of laughter. The birthday girl, Alejandra, wears a yellow dress. Boys sport sharply creased Wranglers and shiny boots. Under a yellow canopy, we feast on pork smothered in red chile, rice, salad and warm tortillas.

While the kids whack at a pinata, I chat with Alejandra's cousin Lisset Saenz, 17. She's a plump girl with carefully lined lips and a bright orange T-shirt that reads: "You can have him." She was born here, but after her father died, her mother married widower Manuel Melendez. Born in Ojinaga, Manuel is a naturalized U.S. citizen, and he immediately moved his wife and her two daughters to Van Horn. They come back here as often as possible, Lisset says.

When I ask if she prefers the U.S. or Mexico, she seems torn. On the one hand, she attends school in Van Horn. But she's happier when here, she says. "There's nothing to worry about here. Van Horn, everyone cares about what you have, and who has more things. Here, everybody is equal."

Ruben watches his daughter tear into her gifts. Life is difficult here, but "you go somewhere else and you miss home," he says.

He's a rancher, but he sometimes works as a cook at Indian Hot Springs, a private guest ranch across the river. His family has a home and food to eat. But Alejandra and her 12-year-old brother have never been to school; there aren't enough families left here to keep one open.

"The valley here used to be very productive," says Manuel as the young adults dance to music blaring from a truck stereo. "The river ended all that. There was the year that the river burst its bank. And then the salt cedar. ... It used to be so beautiful."

Yet even after living in the U.S. for decades, he says, "I come here, and it's sheer happiness."

He and his wife will move back after their daughters are on their own, he says. "I think I'm going to die here."

Erich and I have decided against going on to Ojinaga. So after the party, under the night sky, we start the two-hour drive back to El Porvenir.

Along the way, we see a huge tractor and truck traveling slowly in the opposite direction. We have heard that drug traffickers frequently cross the forgotten river at night, their vehicles pulled across by tractors. We pretend to notice nothing.

I think of Alejandra and the life she'll inherit along a river that promises nothing in the way of farming or ranching. Again I wonder, does a broken river mean broken lives?

What will happen to these children? Will they choose to remain along the river? Will they succumb to desperation and make their own illegal treks across the river in the middle of the night?

And is there hope for the river itself? The damage we've seen here seems overwhelming.

Santa Elena

Two days later, on the Texas side, I float on a raft toward Big Bend National Park's Santa Elena Canyon. The Rio Grande here is so different from the wounded river between Fort Hancock and Presidio, it's hard to believe it's the same river. The river here has a serene, confident flow. I remind myself that the flow beneath me comes from the Rio Conchos.

We've hired a guide to take us on the river. We follow Marcos Paredes as he patrols by canoe. Marcos is a burly guy who has been with the National Park Service for 17 years. He is one of two river rangers charged with patrolling 245 miles of river bordering 800,000 acres of park that are home to mountain lions, black bears, snakes, birds and bats.

As he paddles near our raft, Marcos says he does everything from pick up trash to issuing DUI citations, from rescuing capsized boaters to rounding up trespassing cattle.

At first he speaks slowly, carefully, almost shyly. But the further we go downriver, the more impassioned he becomes.

The river has offered him a place to contemplate major decisions, such as marriage or buying a house. What he wants more than anything is for his grandkids to enjoy the Rio Grande as much as he has.

Like others we've met, he fears for the river.

"What people have got to understand is how close we are to killing this river," he says. "And dead is dead."

Later, as we eat in the shade along the banks, he says: "There are values that we don't traditionally look at that we should consider - solitude, quiet, dark skies. How far should we go to protect that?"

After lunch, we seek relief from the scorching sun by immersing ourselves in the cool waters of a spring that flows from Mexico.

That evening, we make camp at the entrance to Santa Elena Canyon. I wander to the canyon's yawning mouth and listen to the water rush into the chasm. The setting sun casts long shadows on the canyon's pink-tinted walls.

While our guide cooks salmon and rice, we sit in camp chairs and listen to the river. Mesquite, retama, seep willow, desert willow and cottonwood trees grow along the river, but again, salt cedar dominates.

A binational effort to control the cedars with an environmentally safe herbicide is proving effective, says Marcos. Across the river in Boquillas Canyon, workers have used it to remove much of the salt cedar. There are plans to have them do the same on this side, "hopefully all the way up through the forgotten river."

Scientists also see promise in a leaf-cutter beetle that is the tree's natural enemy, he says.

As he speaks, I feel a bubble of hope. Perhaps the river isn't lost yet. It certainly looks healthy here where its flow churns up gravel and dirt, creating the water's brown color.

We need places where "there is no phone, no pager, no way off the river except to go down it," Marcos says. "No way to hear news about anything. It is actually a relief, as if we need that excuse to not be in touch."

He was on the river when John Lennon died and when the World Trade Center was attacked. Word did not reach him there.

As strange as that was, he says, "I do think it's important to have places folks can go and get away. And they're scarcer all the time. You can launch on the lower canyons and not see another person.

That's common. It's uncommon anywhere else. When is the last time you did that?" he asks me. "Or did you ever?"

I don't even have to think about it: "No."

A new view

The next morning, we float down Santa Elena Canyon. Gradually, the limestone walls above us climb from a dizzying 300 feet to an unbelievable 1,500 feet. Canyon wrens drift on air currents high above us, their whoops echoing off the stone.

At noon we hike a short way into Mexico's Fern Canyon. There we drink cold water from a spring, climb through a tiny waterfall and explore a bat cave. By the end of the day, I am sunburned and muddy. I am also changed in a way I never expected.

Living in El Paso, I regularly crossed the international bridge to visit my cousins, my grandparents in Juarez, never considering once that ribbon of water beneath us. The river was an inconvenience, a passive ditch under that bridge clogged with cars spewing exhaust.

I made that trip one last time my freshman year in college, to see my dying grandfather. Then, I never considered that this body of water, too, was a living thing that could die.

As we leave Big Bend, though, the river is under my skin. I long to return next year and float down other canyons, to savor that feeling I tasted so briefly the past two days - that of being one with the river, of the water in my own body pulling like a magnet toward the river. I long to see a day when we fix the problems with this river that has provided so much life.

The question of how to help the river will haunt me as we make our way to the Gulf of Mexico. But so will that small thing that keeps people like Aurelia, Ruben, Manuel and Marcos anchored to the river: hope.

Next week: Lessons learned on the journey to the sea.

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CALL OF THE RIVER

What is the lure of the Rio Grande? Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel searched for the answer along 1,900 miles of the river, from its source to the Gulf of Mexico. In Part 3 of this four-part series, they explore the "forgotten river" and Big Bend along the Texas-Mexico border.

Take a multimedia trip with Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel along the 1,900 miles of the Rio Grande. More photos, their memories and yours are available online, along with more resources and the previous installments in this series. or eschlegel@dallasnews.com

GRAPHIC: MAP(S): Rio Grande River; PHOTO(S): (ERICH SCHLEGEL/Staff Photographer) 1. Family and friends dance at a birthday party in Ojos Calientes, Mexico. Life along the "forgotten river" is tough, says Ruben Porras, but "you go somewhere else and you miss home." 2. The birthday girl, 5-year-old Alejandra Porras, comes up from taking a bite out of her birthday cake. 3. Alberto Torres calls the "forgotten river" area "a valley of misery, a valley of tears." Read more about Mr. Torres on DallasNews.com. 4. The Jaquez family truck is pulled through a flooded section of the main road from El Porvenir to Ojinaga, Mexico. 5. On the way to his ranch southeast of El Porvenir, Alberto Torres (right) greets Tomas Torres, an old friend and the only family left in the village of Banderas. 6. River guide Mike Long (left) cools off with National Park Service ranger Marcos Paredes in Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park. 7. Rio Grande River 8. ON THE COVER: National Parks Service ranger Marcos Paredes paddles through Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park.

LOAD-DATE: December 14, 2005

Copyright 2005 THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
December 18, 2005 Sunday
SECOND EDITION

SECTION: LIFESTYLES - SUNDAY LIFE; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 2594 words

HEADLINE: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE On its way to the Gulf of Mexico, the Rio Grande carries stigma and promise

SERIES: THE CALL OF THE RIVER

BYLINE: BEATRIZ TERRAZAS , Staff Writer

BODY:

BROWNSVILLE - The small plane's engine roars in my ears, and the wind from the open doorway whips my hair around. Below us, the Rio Grande Valley unfurls toward the sea. We see homes, plowed fields and citrus groves thick with trees.

Then, magnificent in the morning light, we see the river itself on the final leg of its journey. It loops back on itself time after time in giant, graceful curves, as if its last few miles have given it a second wind, a certain joy in arriving at the Gulf of Mexico.

This is the part of the river alongside which my colleague, photographer Erich Schlegel, grew up. Born in Mexico, he was 10 when his family moved to Brownsville. Every chance he had, Erich was in the Gulf. He loved the waves under his surfboard. I expected that he grew up loving the Rio Grande as well.

But I was surprised to find he never went near the river as a boy. The Rio Grande, which springs forth so gloriously from the mountains of Colorado, carried a stigma in South Texas that made it off-limits. Among the warnings Erich heard as a kid: "It's not clean. There's smugglers. There's illegal aliens. There's Border Patrol."

In Big Bend National Park, a ranger told me that a river's job is to move the mountains to sea. It's hard to think of the warnings that Erich heard when, from here, the river simply looks like it's doing its job.

We see how the channel narrows as it stretches toward the Gulf. And there, with pelicans by the hundreds flying over it, it empties into the ocean. There is a simple beauty in this river's struggle to finish its journey.

Yet on our final trek along the Rio Grande, we will find that some of the attitudes Erich encountered as a child still persist. We will discover that people still relate to the river in ways sculpted largely from their personal experiences. For some it represents our country's protection from illegal immigrants, while for others, it is a vast source of wildlife and natural habitat too often ignored. For others still, the river means survival.

As for me, I've come to see it as something precious in and of itself.

The divide

On a hot autumn afternoon, we get out of the car at a bend in the river near McAllen, and Elizabeth "Liz" Almanza, 30, walks toward the bank. It is high, and thick with trees and shrubs. From here we can see the bathers in the broad, brown-green band of water.

"Well, let's see, they're just swimming," says Liz. "Usually when it's young ones, they're having fun while the older people wash their clothes."

After four years as a field agent, Liz just started a one-year stint in the public affairs office for the U.S. Border Patrol in the Rio Grande Valley Sector headquarters. She's escorting us on a ride-along.

Liz enjoys the river scenery and the fact that the outdoors is her office. But the river is first and foremost a tool in her daily work. "I've always seen it as the division between two countries," she says.

It's a view born of her personal history. She was born in San Juan, Texas, just a couple of miles east of McAllen, but through third grade she lived across the border in Reynosa. Her father was a resident alien who worked in Texas for a fruit and vegetable company. His three oldest kids were born in Mexico, and his three youngest were born in the U.S.

In 1980, her father petitioned for legal status for his Mexican kids. In 1985, just before Liz's fourth-grade year, he moved his American kids to Hidalgo, Texas. The request for the others hadn't been granted, so he and his wife left them with relatives in Reynosa and visited them weekly.

By the time the request was granted in 1995, his two oldest children had put down roots and remained in Mexico. The other daughter eventually came north.

Liz saw her first woman Border Patrol agent during those early border crossings and was mesmerized by the woman's sense of authority, she says.

In Hidalgo, the family lived near the river, and her parents gave her the same stern warnings about it that Erich heard as a child. "They would just tell us not to go there, so I never did," she says.

The river is polluted now, and she sometimes smells raw sewage from Mexico, she says. "Would I ever go into the river if I didn't have to? Probably not."

As we leave the swimmers, one young man shows us his middle finger and shouts in perfect English, "For your National Geographic collection. ... Want an autograph with that picture?"

The next afternoon, agents apprehend a family from El Salvador near the levee. By the time we arrive, several men have been searched and placed in a van. Six women and three children sit on the curb near a gas station. Because Liz is the only woman agent in the area, she searches the women.

Methodically she pulls extra panties, sanitary pads and toothbrushes from pockets, and identification cards from under bras. One boy watches her silently, arms crossed over his knees, tapping a finger rhythmically against his forearm.

Yesterday, Liz said that the Rio Grande has become even more important to national security since 9-11. "It makes our job a lot easier," she said. "In Arizona, they have no river. They can just drive, walk across. ... Here, it's more of a deterrence. At least there's something dividing our country."

I asked if she ever feels ambivalence about arresting people coming across the river. She, too, once lived in Mexico with parents who dreamed of a better life. She, too, has a toddler daughter she cares about.

"My job is to enforce the law, and that's what I'm going to do," she says. "Do you feel bad at times? Yeah. But it's my job, and I'm going to do it.

"In a way I go back to my parents. They didn't want to come illegally, and they didn't. Everything should be done in an orderly way."

The beauty

A couple of days later, I'm riding to Anzalduas County Park near Mission with Texas master naturalist Roy Rodriguez. We're going to meet a group of kids from the Edinburg World Birding Center.

Unlike Liz, Roy sees the river as something that should bring people together, not divide them. He calls the river a "ribbon of history" that binds two cultures and two countries. And he is passionate about what it offers.

"Oh, crap, a good bird in a tree," he says suddenly. "We're going to have to stop for it. Harris' Hawk - right on that tree - see him?" He pulls over to the shoulder.

Roy is an encyclopedia of bird knowledge. After just an hour with him, I've learned that shorebirds eat certain foods depending on the type of bill they have. I've learned that fulvous whistling ducks really do whistle. And I've learned that by pursing your lips into a "pshpshpshpsh" sound, you can flush house wrens out of the shrubs for a moment.

Roy, 39, is stocky, with a beard and mustache, and wears jeans and brown hiking boots. He works full time for a nonprofit agency, but he's also one of a handful of bilingual bird guides in the Valley.

The last few miles of river lie along the biggest migratory flyway between North and South America. This makes the Valley a mecca for wildlife enthusiasts. According to the McAllen Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Rio Grande Valley sees 125,000 wildlife watchers, primarily birders, each year. They pump \$125 million into the economy.

Yet until eight years ago, Roy had no idea about the river's role in providing a habitat for the more than 500 bird species tourists come to see. He grew up hunting and fishing along the river but had never trained binoculars on an animal simply to admire it. Until the day he boarded a bus with a load of "winter Texans" on a birding tour.

"We had 88 species in about 3 hours," he says.

Despite the occasional raw sewage in the river from Mexico, the environment is quite healthy here, he says. "One good way to mark that is predators," such as hawks, he says. "They're at the top of the food chain. If they exist, everything below them exists."

At Anzalduas Dam, the river reflects the blue sky. Patches of grass sprout from gravel bars, and Mexican fishermen wade hip-deep.

As Roy helps the kids with telescopes and binoculars, Becky Sova, 11, talks to me. The girl with the brown ponytail has been with the kids' birding club for about a year.

"You know the bird that people call the beach seagulls?" she says. "The laughing gulls and all those different types of gulls - seagulls don't really exist."

"They don't?" I say.

"No, people just call them that. ... 'Cause they're always at the sea, near the ocean, probably."

She enjoys the river because of the birds, she says. I ask if there are other things she likes about it.

"It looks pretty," she says. "I like how it shined in the sunlight. I like all the rocks and how it looks. That's it."

Later, as we stand under the shade of trees in the park, the kids suddenly spot flocks of turkey vultures flying south.

"Now look what they're doing," Roy points at the black specks spiraling in the blue above us. "They're kettling. You ever see boiling water in a kettle? And the water goes like that," he makes circles with his hands. "They call it kettling when the birds are just staying in one place, like boiling in circles." They're looking for thermals, or warm air currents to ride to conserve energy, he says.

He comes to Anzalduas Park because it's a public place where the kids can return. It's part of teaching them to see the resources in their own back yards, he says.

"What I always try to impart to folks is that we live in a place that's not like any other place in the world," he says. "And when you start paying close attention to your tiny, little piece of the world, you start to care about it. And it makes you want to care about every other little piece of the world."

The provider

On our final morning in the Valley, we cross the border into Matamoros and drive to Playa Bagdad. We drive northeast along the Mexican beach for about 20 minutes, until we reach the Rio Grande's mouth. We arrive at a fishermen's hut just as the colors of the land, sky and water begin to peel away from night's shadows and show up green, pink and blue.

With the surf at our backs, we climb into a motorboat with Javier Zamora, 33, and another man from a local fishing co-op. Javier, his flyaway hair under a cap, starts the engine, and its roar fills my ears.

White pelicans and gulls bob on the water. Great blue herons stand in the grass along the banks. When Erich says it's lovely out here, Javier beams and says, "Come out more often, I'll take you around."

Despite the river's beauty, Javier and the others wouldn't be living out here if not for the money. It's a better living than the mechanic's job he used to have, he says.

A few years ago, the river had so little water, so little strength that it couldn't push through the sand that had built up at its mouth and flush out to sea, he says. Several fishermen brought a plow to clear out the plug. Now, as we saw from the plane the other morning, it's flowing freely.

Around a bend upriver, we transfer to Pablo Cruz's boat, and he takes us upstream, the river flat and wide before us. He's careful to stay on the Mexican side.

He slows the boat down and hauls a cage out of the water. He keeps two of the three crabs and throws the smallest one back. By rote, he empties and baits trap after trap with gloved hands. The crabs scratch around in the plastic crate in the boat. One escapes and scuttles toward my feet.

Pablo has five kids, ages 5 to 15, to feed. His wife is ill today, but normally she helps him out here, leaving the kids in Matamoros in their grandmother's care.

"I'd prefer to be home ... but fishing pays well," he says. He gets 7 pesos - about 70 cents - per kilo of crab, 20 pesos per kilo of fish, and 25-100 pesos per kilo of shrimp.

"Let's go," he says after checking some 30 traps. "We're out of bait." He pops open a beer and lights a cigarette.

At Pablo's hut, Javier fries some trout. He chops jalapenos and tomatoes for a hot sauce, and we dig into fish tacos.

"I used to cross the river all the time for work," says Pablo. But the fear of being caught or robbed has dampened his enthusiasm.

Before turning to fishing, he worked at a tortilla factory in Brownsville where he made about \$100 a week. "I'm getting 400 pesos a day," about \$40, "and in Brownsville I can't make that," he says. But the work takes its toll. "It's been two weeks since I've been home."

If they could harvest the American side of the channel, they'd make even more money, Pablo says. Once, he placed a net there. Border Patrol agents caught him and let him take it back. They'd haul him in next time, they warned.

After breakfast, Javier returns us to our vehicle. There is a loneliness underlying his pleas for us to visit him again.

I think of Pablo, who'd rather be home with his family than living in a hut on the bank of a river. And I wonder how much longer both fishermen will stay.

The Gulf

Back at Playa Bagdad, where the river pushes into the Gulf, the sea pushes back. Where they meet is called Boca Chica, meaning "little mouth." Gulls group by the hundreds, the thousands, on the flat stretch of sand by the river channel.

The water there flows deeper, bluer, cooler than what swishes onto the beach. In the middle of the river, where the current makes its final tug to sea, lies the last strip of border. The proof is in the Border Patrol SUV parked on the beach across from us.

"I can't believe we were where this begins," Erich says, bringing us full circle to the Colorado mountain streams that launched the river's journey, and ours. He has called this a life-changing journey.

For him, the river was once a forbidden place, and along the way he came to see people playing, fishing, enjoying the river in ways he hadn't seen before.

In my life, the river has been different things at different times - a playground, an inconvenience, a line that fractured my family and sometimes my own sense of identity. I live on the U.S. side of the river, but part of my soul is tethered to the other side, land of my parents and grandparents.

Yesterday, Roy Rodriguez said the main issue with the river is "do people find any value in it? Do we neglect the connection that we have with it?"

"We are connected to the planet," he said. "The stuff that's in it is connected to us. When you can find that connection in your little part of the world, then you can almost see your place in the patchwork. And when you do that, then all of a sudden you are a human being, all of a sudden you do belong here."

I think about the people we've met on this journey - the river guides, the Pueblo peoples, the ranchers in both countries, the authorities, the fishermen. They - we - are connected to the river in unique ways. Because of our ties to it, we're tied to each other, too.

I have come to see the river as something apart from my own narrow experiences with it - as a living, beautiful thing worthy of saving. I don't know what my role in that task will be. But perhaps,

as Roy says, seeing my own small place in the river's web of connections among people is a good place to start.

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Take a multimedia trip with Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel along the 1,900 miles of the Rio Grande. More photos and stories are available online, along with resources and the previous installments in this series.

CALL OF THE RIVER

What is the lure of the Rio Grande?

Beatriz Terrazas and Erich Schlegel searched for the answer along 1,900 miles of the river, from its source to the Gulf of Mexico.

In the final installment of this four-part series, they reach the Gulf of Mexico - and see a Rio Grande that changes with the people who are looking at it.

GRAPHIC: MAP(S): Rio Grande River; PHOTO(S): (ERICH SCHLEGEL/Staff Photographer) 1. Carlos Lopez Medel uses a net to fish for shrimp near the mouth of the Rio Grande at Playa Bagdad, Mexico. Fishermen can fetch 25 to 100 pesos per kilo of shrimp - far more than they can make doing other work across the border in Brownsville. 2. Master naturalist Roy Rodriguez (center) guides (from right) Linda Helm and Glen and Suzanne Chappell through the Frontera Audubon Center in Weslaco, Texas, as part of the recent Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. 3. Elizabeth Almanza, a U.S. Border Patrol agent, frisks a group of Salvadoran women in Hidalgo, Texas. Ms. Almanza sees the Rio Grande as a divide, a deterrent to those who would enter the United States illegally. 4. Citrus farmer Jimmie Steidinger samples a Rio Red grapefruit at a friend's orchard near Donna, Texas. 5. A late afternoon aerial view of the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Gulf of Mexico. Master naturalist Roy Rodriguez sees the Rio Grande as a "ribbon of history" binding two cultures and two countries. 6. White pelicans, brown pelicans and seagulls take flight at Playa Bagdad, where the Rio Grande meets the Gulf of Mexico. 7. ON THE COVER: Fisherman Juan Estrada nets shrimp near the mouth of the Rio Grande at Playa Bagdad, Mexico.
LOAD-DATE: December 18, 2005