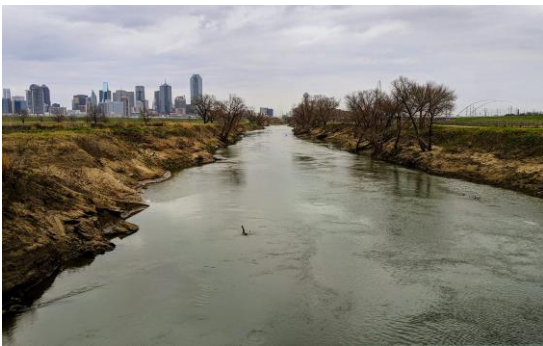


5-5-01

Red River

I can't remember when I've not been interested by rivers. The first river I remember is the Trinity River, which goes through the middle of Dallas, much as the James goes through Richmond. Once a year the river generally floods. I delighted in a family drive across the river into Oak Cliff to see the river looking like pictures of real rivers, such as the Amazon and the Nile - an expanse of water filling the great space between the dikes. But the flood time did not last long and soon the river reverted to a pathetic little creek flowing in its narrow channel - or no river at all, just a discouraged little stream that must have been ashamed to hear itself called a river. Nevertheless, at times it acted up, making clear why the two large dikes had been built to separate the north part of Dallas from the south. It was obvious to me that the floodwaters of the Trinity did not enrich the plains of Texas as the Nile did Egypt.



Trinity River



Red River

For many years I didn't have many rivers to compare with the Trinity. When we drove south from Dallas, we would pass a few, generally no larger than the Trinity. On the other hand, when we drove north to visit Daddy's and Mother's families in north Texas and south-central Oklahoma, we would cross another river, notable not for its size but for its deep red color. For many miles the Red River served as the dividing line between Texas and Oklahoma, and I found it fascinating not only for its having taken on the color of the land through which it flowed but for the real purpose it had in the maps I studied at school - a real line instead of a man-made line to show the boundary of two states. Moreover, it had a menacing-looking current despite its small size. I especially enjoyed crossing the Red River when it was in flood stage. *That* was truly a river. I wondered about its strength and the deep color of its waters.

I have no idea when my big adventure with the Red River took place. I couldn't have been more than nine or ten. I don't know whether my sister and I were with our Oklahoma cousins or our Texas cousins; there were a number of children having a wonderful time with each other, but whoever was driving the car, and, therefore, in charge of us "kids," was sympathetic with our whims. There was a half-hearted suggestion that we park off the road and swim across the river - the Red River which we had just crossed. It met with immediate general enthusiasm. I was not a very bold child, but I saw nothing at all wrong with our getting into swim suits and playing in the river. I

was very proud of my new white suit and surely must have wanted to show it off. We were soon wading through the water and finding it no different from any other water we had been in, except for the red color which was even more vivid in person than from the car. That portion of the river was quiet and deep enough to swim in without any resistance or help from the current, which had looked very small and inconsequential when we looked down on it from the bridge above. It looked quiet and deep enough to allow us to swim wherever we wanted. To swim from one state to another was positive lure for me. I had no doubt that I could manage the force of the current. I remembered movies when the swimmers calculated the force of the current to figure where they could land when they reached the other side, and I idly calculated where I would land on the other side and struck out.

Whoa! Wait a minute! The force of the water was more powerful than I could have imagined. I was not nearly the strong swimmer that I had thought I was. I did not, however, panic. I simply swam as hard as I could back toward Oklahoma. Without saying a word, I went back to playing and splashing with the cousins, brother, and sister for a few minutes; no one else had thought of swimming across the stream. Shortly, we tired of the limited fun we could have in the calm water. Back at the car, we quickly changed into our clothes, using the towels provided by whoever had had the foresight to bring the swim suits. We returned to our families and reported proudly about our adventure in the Red River, which, we declared, was red through and through. A glance at my formerly white suit proved that. No amount of washing ever got all the red out, but it did fade before summer was over into a rather attractive pink.

As I've gotten this far into my story, I can account for the swim suits and the towels. We had been visiting Mother's brother in Ardmere when my cousin Elsie Ve told us about swimming in Sulphur Springs where the water was always cold and had thin quarter-sized flakes of sulphur floating in the water. But why we went south to the Red River and not North to Sulphur Springs, I cannot say. We did go to Sulphur Springs the next day or so, and swimming there was entirely a different experience from the Red River. All that I remember of the rest of that day is returning to Ardmere, telling the uncles and aunts about our fun. I was somewhat amazed that those careful adults did not explain to us the dangers we mercifully avoided, for by that time, maybe because of my getting into the current of the river, I was beginning to see that it was not a particularly safe sport. Perhaps that event made me, years later, a hyper-cautious mother.

There survives today only one person who shared that adventure and could perhaps recall more of it. And I already know what she would say. She would be wrong. I remember parts of that afternoon too vividly to have made it up entirely. I'll still keep fishing in my memory for other details of that adventure. Maybe they're there!