

## *Goodbye to a River*

"If a man couldn't escape what he came from, we would most of us still be peasants in Old World hovels. But, if, having escaped or not, he wants in some way to know himself, define himself, and tries to do it without taking into account the thing he came from, he is writing without any ink in his pen."

Even more relevant today, *Goodbye to a River* speaks to modern society's detachment from the natural world. As he floats "his piece" of the Brazos, Graves—who learns to let go of impatience and "get slowed down"—fly-fishes for bass, listens to a Carolina wren duet with a redbird, and admires the "fine privacy" of a morning fog.

In the 1950s, a series of dams was proposed along the Brazos River in north-central Texas. For John Graves, this project meant that if the stream's regimen was thus changed, the beautiful and sometimes brutal surrounding countryside would also change, as would the lives of the people whose rugged ancestors had eked out an existence there. Graves therefore decided to visit that stretch of the river, which he had known intimately as a youth. *Goodbye to a River* is his account of that farewell canoe voyage. Wistful, humorous, keenly observant and philosophical, Graves ponders past and present as he and his pup, Passenger (his real name was Watty), float the river and live off the land. As he braves rapids and fatigue and the fickle autumn weather, he muses upon old blood feuds of the region and violent skirmishes with native tribes, and retells wild stories of courage and cowardice and deceit that shaped both the river's people and the land during frontier times and later. Nearly half a century after its initial publication, *Goodbye to a River* is a true American classic, a vivid narrative about an exciting journey and a powerful tribute to a vanishing way of life and its ever-changing natural environment.

Dams were essential, Graves later conceded in the river book's early pages.

"But if you are built like me, neither the certainty of change nor the need for it, nor any wry philosophy will keep you from feeling a certain enraged awe when you hear that a river you've known always, and that all men of that place have known always back into the red dawn of men, will shortly not exist ... A piece of river, anyhow, my piece ... What I wanted was to float my piece of river again. All of it."

He embarked on Armistice Day 1957, a strapping, dark-haired man whose only companion in a heavily loaded canoe was a dachshund puppy named Watty, who took his name from the Mexican word for peanut, *cacahuate*. They paddled 175 serpentine river miles in three weeks through chilling rain, bitter blue northers, and warm, radiant, yellow-winter afternoons. Mr. Graves scribbled in small notebooks all the while, seeing, remembering, feeling.

His prose, full of philosophy and melancholy, swept readers into his aching meditations. The book is acclaimed as a work of both conservationism and history and has been compared to *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau.

But John didn't want to just write. He wanted to do a garden. He wanted to raise bees. He wanted to tie flies. He wanted to have a vineyard."

Over time, a legend sprang up around the brilliant writer who spent so much of the prime of his literary life piling rock upon rock in blazing summer sun to build a house, harvesting honey, raising cows and goats, growing vineyards, making wine or growing oats.

Those ambitions eventually gave way to a quiet life on his farm, a life for which he had few regrets.

In 1995, as he stood by a stream on his property, Mr. Graves was reminded of a passage from the river book, where, early in the Brazos voyage, he and his dachshund companion were huddled inside their tent against the rain.

"Passenger, you watch,' Graves said "It's going to be a good trip."

Remembering, Mr. Graves smiled broadly. He turned to study a still pool in the stream.

"I'm glad I got the chance to put down in a half satisfactory fashion how I felt about all this, " Graves said. "It's been a damn good trip. Yeah it has."

Author John Graves, whose books became icons of rural life in Texas, died July 31, 2013 at the age of 92 at his home, "Hard Scrabble," near Glen Rose.

Go outside & play.