

THE SPRINGS OF CALHOUN COUNTY

CONTEXT

Springs in Texas have been essential to human life since the earliest Paleo-Indians began to arrive over 12,000 years ago.¹ While there are many large and well known springs in Texas, thousands of smaller springs offered life sustaining water, as well, to first explorers, and settlers arriving in the 1800s, as they traversed and settled in the arid lands of Texas. While the number of springs that existed historically is unknown, one expert believes the number to have been in the 3,000 to 4,000 range. By 2004, the number of documented springs was 1,891 with the majority located in the Texas Hill Country.²

One area in Texas historically lacking springs, however, is the Gulf Coast Prairie and the South Texas Brush Country.³ Although located in the Gulf Prairie region, Calhoun County still had springs that would play an important role in the lives of early Native Americans, explorers, and settlers arriving at frontier seaports and putting down roots in the area, or heading for destinations further inland, including the Texas Hill Country.

OVERVIEW

The number of springs in Calhoun County is small and were first researched and recorded by Gunnar M. Brune in 1976. His research was published in 1981 in his book "Springs of Texas". He found the springs in Calhoun County "flow chiefly from Beaumont sand and silt formations" and "reported the spring water is generally of a

sodium bicarbonate type, and is fresh, very hard and alkaline. Chloride or silicate content may be high.”⁴

Due to the shortage of springs in this area, their significance would have been great to all who passed through or settled in the County. Paleo-Indians were the first humans to access these springs that would provide life sustaining water for thousands of years prior to French explorer Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle entering Pass Cavallo and landing on Matagorda Island in 1685. La Salle noted an Indian village on what is today Saluria Bayou, near his landing area. ⁵ In 1722, the Aguayo-Costales expedition identified springs on Matagorda Island near where construction of Fort Esperanza by Confederate soldiers (near Saluria Bayou) began in late 1861. ⁶ From a map composed by the expedition, Brune believed the springs depicted were seeping from the landward side of the sand dunes at the north end of Matagorda Island. This would likely have been near where La Salle landed and established camp. The Aguayo-Costales map also depicts a spring on the eastern shore of Lavaca Bay, near what is today Alamo Beach, that was named “Ojo de Agua Dulce at San Luis”. In 1976, Brune found a spring near Alamo Beach seeping into the bay and believed “San Luis” refers to the first site of LaSalle’s Fort St. Louis. ⁷

Near Mission Lake in western Calhoun County, an attractive location for a mission was discovered by Franciscan missionaries in 1793. According to the Franciscans, this was “where fresh and pure water was found”, including a *Laguna de Agua Dulce* (sweet water lake) that was situated below a seven meter high bluff. ⁸ Here they founded Mission Nuestra Señora del Refugio in order to teach Karankawa Indians European and Christian values as well as farming and cattle raising. ⁹

Brune also documented a spring on the eastern shore of upper Lavaca Bay. This was the location of Linnville, the earliest Anglo settlement in Calhoun County and was established by John J. Linn in 1831. The town was attacked and ransacked by Comanche Indians in the Linnville Raid of 1840. After destruction of the town, residents relocated 3-1/2 miles down the bay to the site of La Vaca, near the mouth of Linn Bayou.¹⁰ Not a coincidental location as a spring that was observed flowing by Brune in 1976, was located less than a mile from Linn Bayou, and near the intersection of Commerce and Cypress streets on the bay front.¹¹

At a County Historical Commission meeting in May 2013, longtime Port Lavaca resident, Randle Clay recalled his childhood experiences related to water sources in the city. "He recalled hauling water from the artesian well (at the end of Commerce St.) in wagons along streets... He stated "the artesian well had a four-inch pipe from which a steady stream of water ran, water which was good as well as being cool." Mr. Clay said the well was eventually capped and is now under the end of Commerce St.¹²

Brune also located other springs in the county with historic interest. One area was near the Joe Brett farm on Chocolate Creek. It consisted of several springs that he named Johnson Springs, after a former treasurer of the Republic of Texas and custom agent for Lavaca who lived in the area.¹³ The farm is currently owned by Joe D. Brett, great-grandson of the original owner. Mr. Brett's father related to him that his father told him that he saw Union soldiers encamped along Chocolate Creek in his youth. This would likely have occurred in 1865, after the end of the Civil War, when Calhoun County was occupied during reconstruction.

Another area known for springs is the Six Mile area of the county. Still flowing today, Brune located small springs on the Ernest Kabela farm near the intersection of Royal Rd. and Hwy 1090. Mr. Kabela advised him that many Indian artifacts had been found here.¹⁴ These springs flowed into Six Mile Creek and would have been used by travelers on the road from Lavaca to Victoria, including US and Confederate soldiers. After the raid on Linnville, Mrs. Watts, a captive of the Indians whose husband had been killed in the raid, camped with the Comanche Indians across the “bayou” from the town.¹⁵ This would have been Six Mile Creek. Mr. Kabela’s grandson, Michael Balajka, reported that the springs still flow in, and around, the 1.5 meter box observed by Brune in 1976. Mr. Balajka also stated spring flow here is affected by weather. When thunderstorms approach, the flow increases, and prior to the arrival of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, the springs flowed heavily.¹⁶

SIGNIFICANCE

When the explorer La Salle arrived in 1685 at what would become Calhoun County, its springs had already provided life-giving sustenance to humans, and animals alike, for thousands of years.¹⁷ The relatively small number of springs through time enabled this area to be habitable even during periods of drought and were, therefore, significant to those whose lives depended on them.

A marker dedicated to the springs of Calhoun County will bring awareness to residents and others of the role springs have played in historical settings throughout the county and over many thousands of years.

DOCUMENTATION

1. "*The State of Springs*", Larry McKinney, TPW Magazine. July 2005.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. "*Springs of Texas*", Gunnar M. Brune. 1981. p. 104.
5. *A Matagorda Bay Magnetometer Survey*, 1982. J. Barto Arnold III. p. 15.
6. *Handbook of Texas Online*, J. Barto Arnold III, "FORT ESPERANZA," accessed June 13, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qcf02>
7. "*Springs of Texas*", Gunnar M. Brune. 1981. p. 104.
8. "*Springs of Texas*", Gunnar M. Brune. 1981. p. 105.
9. *Handbook of Texas Online*, June Melby Benowitz, "Nuestra Senora Del Refugio Mission," accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uqn18>
10. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Craig H. Roell, "Linnville, TX (Calhoun County)," accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvl58>
11. "*Springs of Texas*", Gunnar M. Brune. Page, Gunnar M. Brune. p. 105.
12. Calhoun County Historical Commission Minutes. May 14, 2013.
13. "*Springs of Texas*", Gunnar M. Brune. Page, Gunnar M. Brune. p. 105.
14. Ibid
15. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Craig H. Roell, "Linnville Raid of 1840," accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/btl01>
16. Gary Ralston interview with Michael Balajka - June 14, 2018.
17. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Diana J. Kleiner, "Calhoun County," accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hcc02>

