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The Rivers

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The Rivers

Blaine County is crossed by two major streams, the north and south branches of the Canadian River that join together briefly in eastern Oklahoma before draining into the Arkansas River. Known locally as the North Canadian and the South Canadian, the rivers flowed untamed by dams when I was growing up and provided a great recreational resource for county residents. Until Roman Nose State Park was developed with federal money in the mid 1930's,

there were no public swimming pools in the county. Cooling off in the muddy river was a popular summertime diversion.

Residents of the Mount Pleasant community supported an active community life even during the hardest times of the Great Depression. With a number of teenagers in the leading families, some kind of community gathering was organized almost every Saturday night during the summer. Although usually held as a party in a family home, at times the get-together was an evening picnic on private land in a grove of trees on the flood plain. A community

ILLUSTRATION BY TAMI DESHIELL

resident had ties with the owner who made the site available for community use on the Fourth of July and on summer Saturday evenings.

Even in the drought years of the 1930's, both rivers would flood and overrun their banks during the spring and early summer rainy season. The South Canadian, while a tiny narrow stream meandering about its sandy half-mile-wide bed much of the year, became a raging torrent of muddy water when heavy rains fell on its watershed. After our family moved to the Langer Place in 1934, only four miles from the river, on a quiet evening we could hear the rumble and roar of the raging waters when the river was at flood stage.

The home of Dwane and Dwight Londagin, two of my closest friends in high school, was located on the north bank of the South Canadian River near the Highway 33 bridge. Exploring the river with them was always an exciting adventure. When the river subsided from flood stage, a few isolated pools would be left, ideal for swimming. On one visit, an unusually large and deep pool had been formed a short distance from the river bank. A huge hollow tree stump claimed by two poisonous water moccasin snakes as their home floated near one end. The snakes cautiously watched us as we frolicked naked and splashed and swam in the water at the opposite end of the pool. We kept an even closer watch on the snakes to be sure they did not leave their lair.

Thickets of wild plums flourished at locations along the sandy banks of the North Canadian. Our neighbor, Harley Woldridge, seemed to know just when the plums would be ripe. On a morning in August, the Woldridge car, loaded with children, suddenly appeared in the driveway. My good friend Donald had urged his father to let me accompany them on the trip to pick plums. We loaded one of our wash tubs and two milk buckets into the car and headed for the river. The bushes on the high north bank were loaded with ripe red plums, large and

luscious, much bigger than the wild plums we called sand cherries that grew at the edge of the woods and along roads in our neighborhood.

With the seven or eight pickers, we cleared the thicket of its ripe plums by lunch time and retreated to a grove of trees adjacent to the Frisco railroad bridge for a lunch of fried chicken, bread and butter sandwiches, and apples for dessert. While Mr. Woldridge napped on a pallet, we youngsters could no longer resist the temptation of the flowing stream. Fully clothed because we were a mixed group, we played and cavorted in the muddy water of the shallow flowing stream. The excitement was heightened when a Frisco steam engine pulling a short string of freight cars crossed the bridge and routinely blew its boilers over the stream sending ear piercing jets of steam into the air over our heads.

River play brought tragedy as well as fun. A neighbor's son, a promising young man in the prime of his adolescence, on an outing with friends dove into a murky South Canadian river pool at a place he had successfully dived the previous day. But the shifting sands of the flowing stream had changed the bottom overnight. The lad so severely injured his spine his limbs were paralyzed. Within a few weeks he was dead. ~

