



Alexis Gaspar with Billy Hale and Grayson Wetzel

Ratler, Texas

By Alexis Gaspar

Ratler, Texas, was a farm community located on the Colorado River approximately 11 mile southwest of Goldthwaite in Mills County, Texas. The community consisted of the Renfro Dam which was constructed between 1876 and 1879, and reconstructed in 1933, and a post office which was established in 1885. Later, two stores, a cotton gin, a gristmill, and a school were built. After 1915, the town declined and the school consolidated with Goldthwaite. The post office closed, and Ratler soon became obsolete. To area lifelong native Billy Hale and his family, though, the small community of Ratler was still home, his livelihood and held many dear memories.

Renfro Dam, which is located on property currently owned by Sheral Rainbolt, holds fond memories for Billy Hale and his childhood friends. "As a child," Mr. Hale stated, "you had to entertain yourself. There were no video games, so we spent hours outside with all the other children that lived in Ratler. Our favorite pastime was to go to the Renfro Dam to swim and fish. Of course, the river was flowing swiftly back then, and we would have a competition to see who could cross under the falls the quickest. If you were lucky, it only took three or four tries before you were successful. If you failed, then you were washed down the river." Fishing was excellent at Renfro Dam during those times. Mr. Hale and his friends enjoyed catching catfish by hand.

Recalling one fishing adventure, Mr. Hale said, "We had Horace Brooks by the feet and he was in a hole under water for what seemed like forever trying to grab a huge catfish. After a while, we didn't think he could breathe any longer and we started to get concerned so we hauled him out. Horace was not at all amused because he said he almost had a huge fish and that we should have left him under water for just a few more moments." During one of his many trips to Renfro Dam, Mr. Hale lost his senior ring. He has still to this day never found it, but maybe one day it will wash up.

Although fishing and swimming were great pastimes for Billy Hale, his family's livelihood has always counted on good ole' fashioned hard work. The Hale family has owned land on the Colorado River in the Ratler community for more than 100 years. During this time, they have harvested pecans, cotton, ribbon cane syrup, peanuts, wheat, grain, corn and watermelons, and raised cattle. As a young boy, Billy Hale worked the cotton field under the direction of his father. "We worked cotton from sun up to sun down on some days," stated Mr. Hale, "but over the years, it became obvious that the soil in Mills County was not the best for a good cotton crop, so we switched over to peanuts." Peanut farming provided Mr. Hale and his family with a good living. Grandpa Hale started out harvesting approximately 27 acres, but Billy Hale ended his peanut raising with about 200 acres. Peanuts were sold by the ton, and the going rate was approximately \$200 per ton. Mr. Hale, together with his son, Gerald, would haul peanuts to Comanche, Texas, to sell, but soon the businesses buying peanuts started closing down, and in order to sell, you had to drive many miles away from Ratler. The Hale land has also been used to harvest watermelons. Who would have guessed that good watermelons were sold just down the road in Ratler, Texas? Today, Mr. Hale uses his land mostly to raise cattle. He still has many pecan trees, but they aren't harvesting very good crops. He has wheat and hay fields, but uses those crops mainly to feed his own livestock.

Ratler, Texas, which is now known as Jones Valley, was destroyed in 1936, when the Colorado River flooded and destroyed everything but the dam. Native families, including the Hales, still remained and rebuilt their homes. At 87 years old, Billy Hale has moved 12 times all over Mills County, but the Ratler community has always remained home. He and his wife, LaVerne, still remain living on the family property located at Ratler (Jones Valley) in the house that Billy Hale's father built in 1939.