

Reflections on the Neches

Author: Geraldine Ellis Watson

Hardcover Price: \$37.95

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Hardcover ISBN-13:9781574411607

Hardcover ISBN-10: 1574411608

Physical Description: 7 x 10. 512 pp. 16 b&w photos.

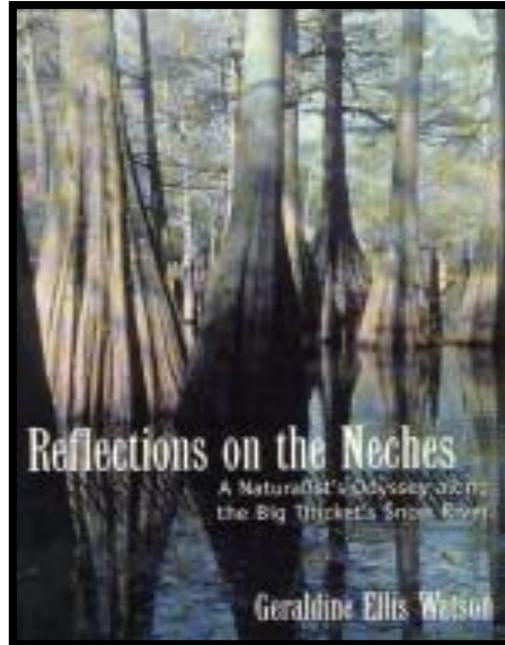
29 line drawings. 20 maps. Index.

Publication Date: May 2003

Series: Temple Big Thicket Series | Volume: 3

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REVIEW: Reflections on the Neches Sunday, August 31, 2003, The Facts, Brazos Living

Review by Marie Beth Jones

Geraldine Watson, a naturalist, grew up hearing stories told by her father about a summer he spent as a teenager floating down the Neches River, which was then the scene of steam boats and log rafts.

At age 63, Watson decided to replicate the journey, using a backwater boat she had built from memory.

Her “Reflections: tell of a wilderness that encompasses everything from generations of woodsmen to ants and wolves, and from timber companies to cowbirds and squirrel hunters.

She gives an educated guess from a scholar that the “Buried Forest” at River Mile 103.5 was in existence some 5,000 years ago.

In another comment, she notes that, “It takes a couple of nights to adjust from a Sealey Posturepedic to the thin pad beneath my sleeping bag.”

At another site, she also mentions noticing the crawfish- about 30 species of which exist in Southeast Texas, each adapted to a particular habitat, and tells about their reproduction and scavenging.

Relating information about Indians who once occupied the area, she points out that most of their food , including roots, nuts, fruits, berries and greens, were found in native plants, as were their medicines and building materials.

At Shiny Lake (River Mile 40.7) she explains that the name came from a whiskey still once located here, and even provides a drawing of such a primitive still.

Other portions of her trip took her past more settled areas, including Four Oaks Ranch at River Mile 34. At this site, George Alexander Patillo built a home and grew fruit trees and produce as well as raising cattle.

“He served in various capacities in the government of his new home through Spanish, Mexican, Republic and state administrations,” she says.

Her trip provides her own “times of pleasure in the present, and times of introspection and reflection,” she writes.

“The scenes before which I passed brought to my remembrance events and people from the past who had given me joy and inspiration, and snatches of songs and poetry I had heard or read somewhere sometime.”

Her book also brings such scenes to life for her readers.

**REVIEW: Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist’s Odyssey
Along the Big Thicket’s Snow River
Botanical Research Institute of Texas**

Review by Barney Lipscomb

If there was ever a dust jacket that made you want to open up a book it is the one on this book. It pictures the glorious bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) with its stunning buttress-like trunks, reflecting on the Neches River. This book is a reflection of Geraldine Watson and her love of nature, East Texas, the Neches River, and the Big Thicket. “The book is a series of essays about a river and its environment, and the kind of people such environs produce, which includes

myself.”

Geraldine Watson, botanist, plant ecologist, naturalist, and conservationist, was one of several people instrumental in raising attention and serving as a national conscience to save at least something of the Big Thicket in East Texas. Thank you Geraldine for your hard work and for giving us a book full of history and memories! Thanks to the T.L.L. Temple Foundation for a generous grant to help publish the book and to the Big Thicket Association for their assistance.

**REVIEW: Reflections on the Neches draws nature and history down the river
7/7/2003 North Texas e-News**

The University of North Texas Press has just published *Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist's Odyssey along the Big Thicket's Snow River* by Geraldine Ellis Watson.

When Watson's father was a teenager around the turn of the last century, he spent a summer floating down the Neches River, called Snow River by the Indians. Watson grew up hearing his tales of the steamboats, log rafts, and the flora and fauna of the region. So when she was sixty-three years old, she decided to repeat his odyssey in her own backwater boat built from memory.

Reflections on the Neches is both the story of her journey retracing her father's steps and a natural and social history of the Neches region of the Big Thicket. The Neches is one of the last "wild" rivers in Texas now being subjected to dams. Watson's story captures the wildness of the river and imparts a history of its people and animals that has never been written in such detail before. She discusses everything from ants to wolves, from the local timber companies to the generations of woodsmen living in the thick of the forest, with equal fascination. Profusely illustrated with drawings by the author and including maps of her journey, *Reflections on the Neches* will appeal to all those interested in the Big Thicket region and those indulging a feeling of wanderlust- and float trips- down the river.

A native of Tyler County, Geraldine Watson lived in various places but currently has come home to East Texas, where she lives on her private nature preserve. She was a plant ecologist and park ranger for the National Park Service for fifteen years, and has earned numerous awards, including honorary membership in the Dog and Wildlife Protective Society of Polk, Tyler, Newton, and Jasper Counties.

This book is Number Three in the Temple Big Thicket Series.

“Like the river, Reflections on the Neches has a natural flow; like the river, it is charming. One is easily drawn into the world of the river, and into the lives of its people”- Pete A.Y.Gunter, Regents Professor of Philosophy, University of North Texas, and author of The Big Thicket: An Ecological Reevaluation

“Reflections on the Neches is very original and very personal. It effectively integrates knowledge of the scientific literature, a lifetime of nature observation, in-depth personal experience of the human inhabitants of this unique place, and Watson’s own life story. It should become an environmental classic.”- Thad Sitton, author of Backwoodsman: Stockmen and Hunters along a Big Thicket Valley.

**REVIEW: University of North Texas Press:
Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist’s Odyssey along the Big Thicket’s
Snow River
August 2003, Art Times**

A personal journey into the past as well as into “Big Thicket” country. Drawings by Regina Watson enhance the text.

Review by Darragh Doiron, Reporter

Crawfish can get along fine when a leg gets cut off in battle, but a missing antennae will disorient the creature. Why does a crawfish battle? It seems males flip over every crawfish encountered during mating season. If one male flips another, there’s the battle.

This tidbit is from Reflections on the Neches, Geraldine Ellis Watson’s guide that’s part journal and part history. A drawing of the Madonna Tree is included. It’s a big hollowed-out cypress that sure enough looks like the holy family is inside. The University of Texas Press book is subtitled “A Naturalist’s Odyssey Along the Big Thicket’s Snow River.

**REVIEW: Authors take readers for a ride down Texas rivers
Friday, August 8, 2003, Victoria Advocate**

Review by Reese Vaughn

Two authors take us along Texas rivers. One tells the true story of a naturalist’s trip down the Neches, while the other describes fictional adventures of a journalist on

the Guadalupe, but both dwell on conflict over precious river territory.

Reflections on the Neches, subtitled *A Naturalist's Odyssey along the Big Thicket's Snow River*, is No. 3 in the Temple Big Thicket Series published by UNT.

Geraldine Watson's family roots in Southeast Texas and her experience as a plant ecologist and park ranger for the National Park Service make her better company than Huck Finn for this river trip.

She's knowledgeable about the fight to preserve the Big Thicket, and she writes affectionately of the disappearing way of life of long-time locals in the Caney Head community, called "Dog People" for their hunting style.

If Watson is sometimes ditzzy, "Every project I take on has its own special stupid accident...." she's game to build her own boat at age 63 and she tells a good story as she floats the Neches. Includes detailed maps.

**REVIEW: New books feature East Texas, West Texas
Sunday, October 19, 2003 Abilene Reporter- News
Also ran in Sunday, October 19, 2003 The Bryan- College Station Eagle**

Review by Glen Dromgoole

Two new books vividly illustrate the diversity of landscapes and cultures in Texas. East Texas and West Texas are, in many ways, two different states residing within the same boundary.

Both cultures are appreciated, even celebrated, in these two fine books.

Geraldine Watson, a former park ranger and frequent writer on the natural wonders of the Big Thicket, writes about her trip in a 14 foot flat-bottom riverboat down the lower 1000 miles or so of the Neches River.

Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist's Odyssey along the Big Thicket's Snow River (University of North Texas Press, hardcover) is more than a travelogue. As she drifts down the river, Watson lets her mind drift as well, and we follow as she records her thoughts and memories and people and cultural history that the trip evokes. The book is reminiscent of John Graves' classic, *Goodbye to a River*, about his own trip down the Brazos.

"We have saved" the Neches River- at least that section between Steinhagen Lake

and Beaumont,” she writes, “and I want to experience it one more time before it is bow-to-stern in canoes, and the mobs of boaters, picnickers and campers descend. I know I shouldn’t begrudge others their legal and moral rights to enjoy what belongs to us all, but to some of us, its greatest attraction is the silence and solitude. Let me take it to my heart just this one last time and then I’ll say, “Here it is world. It’s your. Take care of it.”

The boaters who come after her will not see the river the same way Watson sees it however, for she has spent a lifetime living and loving it. She knows the people, the stories, the natural beauty of that section of Texas, and she shares her knowledge- and her opinions- in this extraordinary. Book.

In much the same way that Geraldine Watson loves East Texas, Red Steagall loves West Texas. He appreciates the rugged landscape and the character of the people who inhabit. In his poems and songs, he celebrates the tradition.....

**REVIEW: Must Read
Adult Nonfiction**

August 4, 2003, Public News Service, Today’s Books, Abstract 7 Index

Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist’s Odyssey along the Big Thicket’s Snow River (University of North Texas Press/ Temple Big Thicket Series May 2003)
Written and illustrated by Geraldine Ellis Watson, East Texas, formerly National Park Service ecologist and ranger. NATURAL HISTORY/ Travel: Neches River Valley, Texas- Journey, Social history, Wild river.

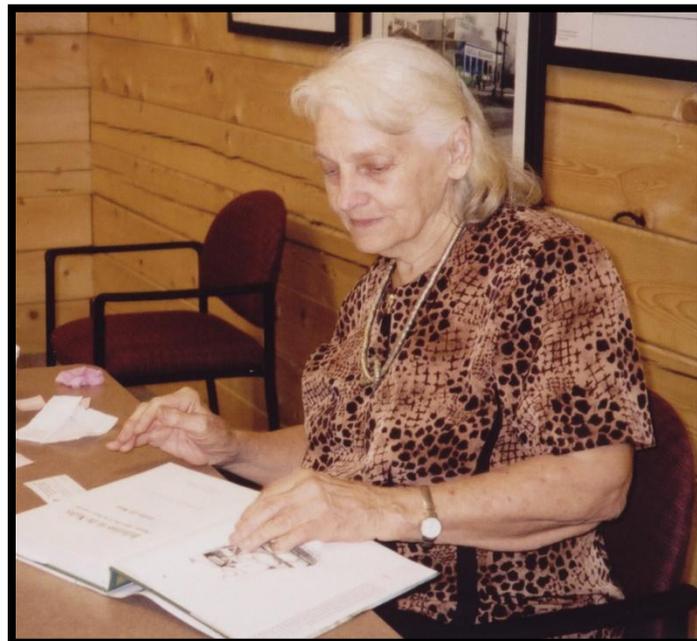
**REVIEW: Floating down the Neches River of the Big Thicket
by Jerry Turner, Tales From Early Texas**

When most ladies are in their mid sixties, they are content to stay at home and spoil their grandchildren, but Geraldine Ellis Watson decided to put some adventure in her life. Remembering the stories of her father, Watson wanted to live the odyssey, he had lived. *Reflections on the Neches: A Naturalist’s Odyssey along the big Thicket’s Snow River* published by The University of North Texas Press is the story of Watson’s journey down one of the last “wild” rivers in the state.

Although, much has changed since Watson’s father traveled the river around the turn of the last century, much has remained the same. Called “Snow River” by the Indians, it is commonly known today as the Neches. The white sand along the river banks reminded them of the occasional snowfall.

Reflections on the Neches is both the story of her journey retracing her father's steps and a natural and social history of the Neches region of the Big Thicket. The naturalness of the Neches River is being subjected to dams and she wanted to travel it before its level and flow is controlled by mammoth concrete structures. Watson's story captures the wildness of the river and imparts a history of its people and animals that has never been written about in such detail before. She discusses everything from ants to wolves, from local timber companies to the generations of woodsmen living in the thick of the forest, with equal fascination. Profusely illustrated with drawings by the author and including maps of her journey, the book will appeal to all those interested in the Big Thicket region and those indulging a feeling of wanderlust- and float trips down the river.

RECOGNITION: Carr. P. Collins Award (\$5000) for Best Book of Nonfiction
WINNER: Don Graham, *Kings of Texas* (John Wiley & Sons)
FINALISTS: Dagoberto Bilb, *Gritos* (Grove Press); Geraldine Watson, *Reflections on the Neches* (University of North Texas Press)



This personal narrative captures the wisdom of an environmentalist and former park ranger who in her twilight years continues to advocate love for the Neches River on an amazing journey.

Mary C. Johnston, Big Thicket Association President, 2011-12