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Goodbye to Falcon Lake

On a typical day in my hometown of Zapata, Texas, a mocking bird sings to greet the morning and a coyote's howl welcomes the night. At the perfect time, just as the sun sets over Falcon Lake, one can see the mountains of Monterrey, Mexico called La Silla del Caballo, Spanish for a horse's saddle, far off in the distance. They shine bright orange and pink in the sunset; a sight one must encounter oneself in order to fully understand its breathtaking beauty. I remember being a child, sitting outside on my front porch alone and dreaming of faraway lands beyond the glowing mountains. A beautiful sight one takes for granted when they leave for long periods of time.

In the opening chapters of John Graves' narrative, *Goodbye to a River*, Graves tells about his "piece" of the river that holds many dear memories to him. I think about my "piece" of Falcon Lake and what it means to me. As a child, I remember hunting for petrified shells on its banks, and the long summer days spent swimming in its waters.

Then there was the "Boat Ramp" and "Paradise Point," my high school hang outs. It was at these places that I shared great conversations, first beers, first kisses and many other first things all beneath the starry sky while watching street lights become stretched out beacons of light upon the rippling lake. To me, it's returning home from college and spending the day with my retired father on his boat. Out on the lake, sitting on the hood of my car, I like to look up at the night sky in Zapata Texas. I get the same feeling as I did when I was a child, as everyone does the first time they see it. Nowhere else in Texas do the stars shine so brightly. If you stare long enough you'll see a shooting star, maybe two if you are lucky, and wish that moments like these could last forever.

To many passing through this small ranch town, Falcon Lake is just another lake in South Texas that is drying up. To me, it is the death of a place that holds so many memories. In recent years, a combination of droughts, an uncontrolled system of agricultural irrigation to the lower Rio Grande Valley, and a lack of respect for water rights on Mexico's part have caused waters to recede.

The receding waters have uncovered a part of history that others, like my grandfather, have tried so hard to forget. The town of "Zapata Viejo" or "Old Zapata" is now exposed. Graves tells about the dams created in the 1950's along the Brazos River and how they changed the way of life for the people. Many people in Zapata, Texas can relate to his experiences.

In 1953, the United States and Mexico dammed the Rio Grande River and created Falcon Lake. The town of Old Zapata was literally drowned. The residents of Old Zapata were forced to relocate to a place miles away. The people resisted and were determined not to be forced out of their home by their government; a place they had lived since the 1600's. Many couldn't believe the water was coming until they saw it. For some it was too late.

A few major buildings were moved to the new site of Zapata, Texas, but those made of block, the majority, that could not be moved were destroyed by dynamite. Many people lost everything. Even the cemetery was moved, my grandfather helped dig up the bodies and place them in the new Zapata cemetery. Not all the bodies were moved and when the waters came, coffins were seen floating in the lake.

Before my grandmother died she took me to her childhood home that now lay exposed. All that was left were pieces of block the dynamite did not destroy. She told me how they could only move the top story of her house because it was made of wood. My great grandparents H. Cuellar and Maria Villarreal Cuellar owned the biggest store in Old Zapata. I remember my great-grandmother very faintly, a fragile old woman who lived to be one month shy of one-hundred years old, who smoked cigarettes every day of her life. The living quarters were above the store, all except one room, we called it the "quarto grande." In there, we found everything from antique perfumes to coffins. It was destroyed this Thanksgiving of 07. All that is left of it is in a display case in my mother's house and those pieces of stone now uncovered by the receding waters of Falcon Lake.

Agriculture was a major part of their lives. When the town was moved the people lost all their water rights. As a result, the agricultural part of Zapata died and many were left without jobs. They also lost their position as a border town, and no longer had the economical advantage of having a "frontera" or sister city of Guerrero. They also lost ties to a city from where many citizens descended.

According to my grandfather, the land in old Zapata was very fertile, and the new area was not fit for crops. The people became very poor they had no means of income. People had to find other ways to make a living. People made money off of the recreational and commercial use of the river. My grandfather became a fishing guide. It was not until later when the gas boomed in the 70's, that he became gauger.

Although Zapata County's main source of income is petroleum and cattle ranching, they still rely greatly on Falcon Lake as a natural resource. Falcon Lake is what Zapata is known for. Winter Texans come to spend the warm winters in RV Parks by the lake, and many fishing tournaments are hosted on this lake as well.

The fact that residents of Zapata County rely so greatly on this resource creates problems for the future. People predict that the water will be scarce in as soon as ten years. People have tried building wells, but the water is so heavy in minerals that it is not fit to drink.

I can relate to Goodbye to a River, because I know how a body of water can become a part of one's life. "Oh how I wished you could have seen it with your own eyes, how beautiful and lush," my grandmother said of Old Zapata. I imagine myself years from now as a grandmother and what I might say to my grandchildren about Falcon Lake and what it might become. "Oh how I wish you could have seen it with your own eyes."

Every body of water has a story, but someone must tell it. Graves gave us a part of his memories that now are visions in the minds of all who read his book. I think about my town and its story, and just like my ancestors said Adios to Zapata Viejo, I hope I will never have to say goodbye to Falcon Lake.