

Depleted Texas lakes expose ghost towns, graves

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BLUFFTON, TX

Johnny C. Parks died two days before his first birthday more than a century ago. His grave slipped from sight along with the rest of the tiny town of Bluffton when Lake Buchanan was filled 55 years later.

Now, the cracked marble tombstone engraved with the date Oct. 15, 1882, which is normally covered by 20 to 30 feet of water, has been eerily exposed as a yearlong drought shrinks one of Texas' largest lakes.

Across the state, receding lakes have revealed a prehistoric skull, ancient tools, fossils and a small cemetery that appears to contain the graves of freed slaves. Some of the discoveries have attracted interest from local historians, and looters also have scavenged for pieces of history. More than two dozen looters have been arrested at one site.

"In an odd way, this drought has provided an opportunity to view and document, where appropriate, some of these finds and understand what they consist of," said Pat Mercado-Allinger, the Texas Historical Commission's archeological division director. "Most people in Texas probably didn't realize what was under these lakes."

Texas finished its driest 12 months ever with an average of 8.5 inches of rain through September, nearly 13 inches below normal. Water levels in the region's lakes, most of which were manmade, have dropped by more than a dozen feet in many cases.

The vanishing water has revealed the long-submerged building foundations of Woodville, Okla., which was flooded in 1944 when the Red River was dammed to form Lake Texoma. A century-old church has emerged at Falcon Lake, which straddles the Texas-Mexico border on the Rio Grande.

Steven Standke and his wife, Carol, drove to the old Bluffton site on a sandy rutted path that GPS devices designate not as a road but the middle of the 22,335-acre lake, normally almost 31 miles long and five miles wide.

"If you don't see it now, you might never see it again," said Carol Standke, of Center Point, as she and her husband inspected the ruins a mile from where concrete seawalls ordinarily would keep the lake from waterfront homes.

Old Bluffton has been exposed occasionally during times of drought. The receding waters have revealed concrete foundations of a two-story hotel, scales of an old cotton gin, a rusting tank and concrete slabs from a Texaco station that also served as a general store. The tallest structure is what's left of the town well, an

open-topped concrete cube about 4 feet high. Johnny Parks' tombstone is among a few burial sites.

Local historian Alfred Hallmark, whose great-great-great grandfather helped establish Bluffton, said his research showed 389 graves were moved starting in 1931 when dam construction began. That's the same year Bluffton's 40 or 50 residents started moving several miles west to the current Bluffton, which today amounts to a convenience store and post office at a lonely highway intersection serving 200 residents.

Residents had to leave their ranches and abandon precious pecan trees, some of which produced more than 1,000 pounds of nuts each year. "It was devastating," said Hallmark, 70, a retired teacher, of the move. "They had no choice."

Other depleted lakes across Texas are revealing much older artifacts. More than two dozen looters have been arrested at Lake Whitney, about 50 miles south of Fort Worth, for removing Native American tools and fossils that experts believe could be thousands of years old.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees Lake Whitney, is patrolling a number of areas that contain artifacts, including some rock shelters once filled with water, said Abraham Phillips, natural resources specialist with the agency.

At Lake Georgetown near Austin, fishermen discovered what experts determined was the skull of an American Indian buried for hundreds or thousands of years. It's not clear what will become of the skull, said Kate Spradley, a Texas State University assistant anthropology professor who is keeping it temporarily in a lab. Strict federal laws governing American Indian burial sites bar excavations to search for other remains.

No such restrictions exist for the nearly two dozen unmarked graves discovered this summer in a dried-up section of a Navarro County reservoir. Some coffin lids are visible just under the dirt. Crews plan to excavate the site about 50 miles south of Dallas and move the remains to a cemetery, said Bruce McManus, chairman of the county's historical commission. He said the area of Richland-Chambers Lake is on property formerly owned by a slave owner.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime find ... and maybe the only silver lining in the ongoing drought," McManus said.

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