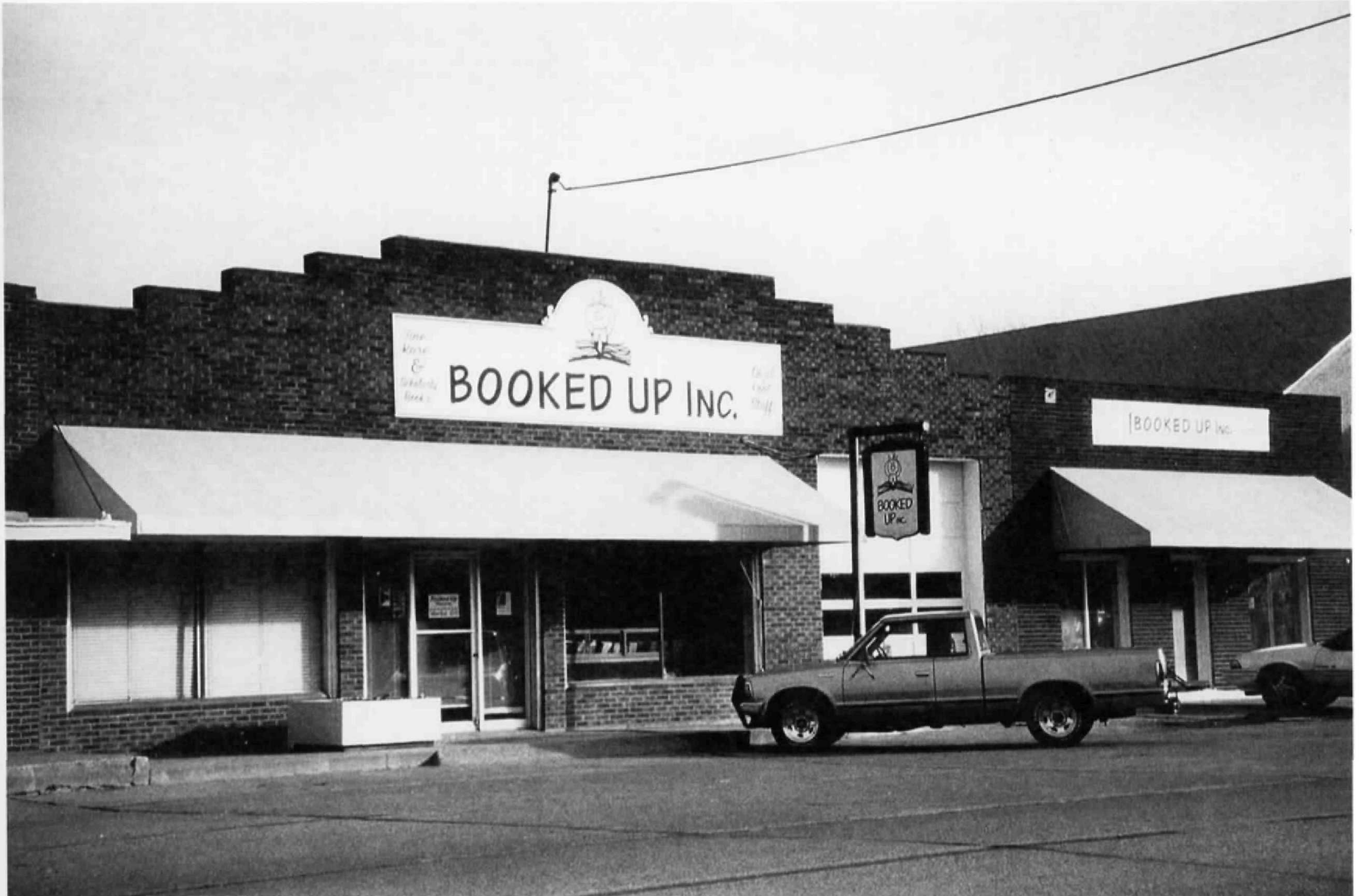

Booked Up, Archer City. Photo by Nonya Grenader, 1997

"I'm still building a book town up in
Archer City now. There are eight or nine towns
in the world that are essentially built around books.
And that's what I'm doing to my town."

Graves Ranch "Hard Scrabble," Glen Rose. Photo by Bill Wittliff

"For a writer like myself, the place has been a source of fascinating material."

OUR OWN PIECE OF COUNTRY

John Graves

As a native of Fort Worth, I can't lay claim to a rural childhood and youth. But my family, like many in the 1920s and 1930s, had links to rustic ways through farmers and cattlemen and small-town merchants and lawyers and such folk in its background, so that our home tended to assume that country things mattered, that you needed to know about them. Within trudging distance of where I grew up, there was unspoiled land along the Trinity River's West Fork — preserved against development by the long stasis of the Great Depression — where I and a number of friends like me used to camp and hunt and fish and learn a little about wild creatures and the places where they lived. Later, in the summers, I worked for a country relative at plowing and wheat harvesting and fence building, and from the start there were also long visits in Cuero, far to the south, where my father's people had lived for what seemed like forever, at least in Texas terms, and where cattle and crops, the bases of the region's economy, were always absorbing topics.

All of that lodged itself in me, though it went dormant during the years that followed, years of college and war and New York and Mexico and Madrid and a number of varied elsewheres. But it awoke again strongly in the late 1950s after I came back home to Texas for an intended brief visit that has somehow lasted until now. And before long, the rural virus led me into buying a hard-used, pretty, secluded patch of cedar-covered limestone hills in Somervell County some 50-odd miles southwest of Fort Worth, where in ensuing decades I channeled much energy and what money I could muster into building a house and outbuildings and fences and roads, and into clearing brush so that little creekside fields could be sowed to forage crops and elsewhere range grasses could take over from the ubiquitous cedar. The aim was to turn the land into a working stock farm and a good place for our family to live, and within a few years this more or less came to pass.

The stock farm as such was never a smashing financial success, nor had I expected it to be. The sale of calves from the 25 or 30 mother cows that such a rough and rocky tract would nourish dependably, after the enormous soil loss caused by overgrazing and cotton farming in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, did not lead to riches. Still less income derived from goats, of which we had plenty at times because they happily eat and control resprouted brush, though they're vulnerable to predators that happily eat goats. By and large, though, the animals paid their way and a bit more, provided entertainment and drama large and small, and at certain times of the year required work in the form of birthing and doctoring and castrating and sorting and such, work that viewed objectively was probably worth more than the beasts themselves but which we mainly enjoyed because it was . . . well, pleasant, if you were built to appreciate such things.

So was other work with a garden, a vineyard, bees, an orchard, and construction. And so too was the place itself, with clear White Bluff Creek that flowed well most of the time; the teeming wildlife; the broad vistas from high places; the hillside secret crannies that children could discover for themselves afoot or on horseback; and the succession of good dogs we had over the years. Our daughters — both of them married city-dwellers now — remember their life here with pleasure and gratitude, as do we aging elders. The land has helped to shape our family and shape it well, which mitigates the fact that in modern economic terms our use of it has been pretty much of a bust.

Economics is a fluid study, though. For a writer like myself, the place has been a source of fascinating material, and by utilizing it as subject matter in print, I attained nothing resembling wealth but a fairly adequate living for a span of years. So maybe that's where economic justification for the whole arduous and satisfying enterprise can be found, if indeed such justification is needed.

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The region itself, the expanse of rough hills of which most of our small county is a part, has been badly abraded by history. Its sloping soils were washed away swiftly during hard early use for grazing and farming, and as living grew skimpier, large segments of the population hauled out, moving on west or to cities. By the 1920s the scattering of hard-bitten yeomen who remained had evolved a minimal economy with two main cash products. One of these was cedar fence posts chopped from the brakes that had taken over the ravaged land, and the other was illicit whiskey brewed and distilled in secret niches among the brushy hills.

Glen Rose, the county's seat and its only real community then and still, enjoyed a degree of profit from its reputation as a spa, based on some fine stinky artesian wells whose sulfurous flow was said to have therapeutic virtue when bathed in or imbibed. But a good share of the imbibing done by patrons of the local sanitariums, operated by "rubbing doctors," seems to have involved not sulfur water but moonshine spirits smuggled down from the hills in jugs and Mason jars. Glen Rose had a wide reputation as a center for the distribution of this beverage during Prohibition and for decades afterward, since much of West Texas stayed legally Dry into the 1960s and remained an eager market. The tough Anglo-Celtic natives who made the stuff were much harassed by the law, which led to many fine tales of pursuits and escapes and conflicts and occasional killings.

A majority of locals, however, eschewed such drama and continued to farm what flat soil still existed on the little tracts they owned or tenanted, ran a few gaunt cattle and hogs, and chopped cedar posts, which at crossroads stores were sometimes a medium of exchange for flour and snuff and shoes and other exotic needs. For sport they often ran hounds at night after coon and fox and bobcat.

In that special little world, which I first glimpsed in the late 1940s when I started going to the area to hunt and fish, a sort of undemoralized poverty remained the norm even after wartime and postwar booms had rejuvenated cities not far away and had sucked away more hill people. The stubborn survivors liked it
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'here they were, despite agricultural and astoral devastation. They knew from xperience that they could subsist on nis land and, more importantly, they *elonged*, hanging onto dignity and 'holeness. They knew the hills' private 'rinkles, and who had what quirks of naracter and who lived where in valleys rained by clear running streams, and ncestral shades stood beside them as ney labored for small return. When I ought the first part of my own place in 960, locals would still work hard at uilding fences or digging foundations r any other task you needed done, for fat two dollars a day.

In a world like ours, all this was ound to change. When key West Texas ties like Lubbock went Wet, the moon-nine trade collapsed. Migrant cedar hoppers, often Hispanic, took over most f that activity, and, for that matter, eel posts forged in distant mills, more urable and easier to install, were coming nto wide use. Decent urban wages, abet-ed by a new war in Vietnam, kept on olling natives elsewhere. And increasing- people from the cities, like me, had egun to buy land in the region, very heaply at first. Many of us intruders ould only afford one or two of the old omestead tracts into which most of the nd was divided, but others had the 'herewithal to combine many such tracts nto good-sized ranches bulldozed clear f cedar, dotted with small lakes behind arthen dams, and fenced tightly with net 'ire to contain herds of Angora goats, 'hose mohair brought in a tidy profit, 'hile the goats themselves controlled ew brush and fitted in well with the attle that grazed new grass. By and rge, these activities were good for the ountry itself, but they displaced old uman ways.

An appetite for change also began to merge among the area's natives, espe-ially those in little Glen Rose, whose nvy was aroused by the boomish growth f other towns nearby. Granbury in par-cular, the seat of Hood County, just orth of Somervell, waked up from a ong rustic doze to find itself burgeoning rom the construction of a big reservoir n the Brazos River with thick residential evelopment along its shores, as well as rom the town's bedroom proximity to 'ort Worth. Confronted with such hum-ning prosperity only a few miles away, Glen Rose boosters wondered when, if ver, they would get their shot.

They found out in the early 1970s, 'hen construction of a nuclear power plant was begun in the county on a Brazos tributary called Squaw Creek, which was dammed to provide cooling water. There was not much opposition to the project in the county itself, where increasingly change of any sort was being viewed as good. But environmentalists in the Dallas–Fort Worth complex kicked up so much fuss and maintained such a critical glare at the details of construction that the plant didn't go on line until 1990, by which time its cost, originally estimated at $779 million, had swelled to about $12 billion. Undoubtedly all of this made us county residents much safer than we might otherwise have been, and these days the thing sits there with its twin reactor towers perking along, and pays taxes of millions on millions of dollars into the county's coffers. There is good fishing in its lake, even in winter near the warm-water outlet.

Myself, I'd just as soon not live about six miles from such an installation if given the choice, but I wasn't, and for that matter a number of decades of life in this century have turned me into a sort of pessimistic accepter of most changes. One change harder to adapt to than the nuke itself, though, was the disruption of local life caused by its construction. At one point, some 11,000 persons were employed on the project, a fair proportion of them natives of the region, but the rest migrant skilled and unskilled workers from all over the nation's map. Many found places to live in neighboring communities such as Stephenville, Granbury, and Cleburne, but plenty settled nearer to the job, often staying on after the job was done. In 1970, before the uproar started, Somervell County had a censused population of 2,793, a figure not much different from those registered every decade for the past 40 or 50 years. By 1980 it held 4,154 people, and in 1990 there were 5,360, of whom a small minority were the old tough hill people I had come to understand and like.

In thus entering the modern world and acquiring wealth, the town and county have undergone many other changes either good or bad, depending on one's viewpoint. Newcomers keep arriving, some to buy pretty land at high prices, others to retire in predominantly Anglo surroundings, or to open small businesses, which mainly flourish if well conceived, or ("carpetbaggers," an uncharitable native friend of mine calls these) to see if by some stratagem they can cause a bit of that copious tax money to trickle in their direction.

The local schools are now housed in large solid buildings surrounded by athletic facilities, a far cry from what used to be. The hospital is a state-of-the-art structure, well equipped and staffed. A highly regarded new golf course spreads beside Squaw Creek, miles downstream from the nuke. In the hills above the course, an amphitheater regularly presents a musical religious pageant called *The Promise* to large and appreciative audiences during the warm months, while not far away, shelter for stock shows, ropings and other equestrian competitions, weddings, country music concerts, and similar public events is provided by a big exposition center.

Et cetera. All new, or at any rate quite recent.

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And us Graveses, here in our enclave on White Bluff Creek? What has the advent of modernity meant to us; what disruptive changes have we had to face?

In honesty, most changes thus far have been of our own devising, except for the sad loss of our live oaks to the wilt disease, a misfortune we share with thousands of other Texas landowners. The place still sits at the end of a small county road that stops at our gate, and the country on other sides is still sparsely peopled hills and pastureland. With the departure years ago of our main source of auxiliary labor — the daughters — Jane's and my interest in going ahead full steam with such time-eating activities as winemaking and beekeeping and vegetable gardening gradually waned and at last evaporated. And finally, in the late 1980s, with age invading my joints and stamina, I somehow ceased to derive great pleasure from patching fences and getting kicked by cows in chutes and sold the little herd, our goats having gone to market a couple of years before. The only cattle using the place now are batches of steers brought in during the growing season by a younger friend, who tends them and keeps the fences tight.

The land itself is being reblanketed by cedar, and I watch the invasion with equanimity. So be it, something within me says; we have "done that." For all this has been not so much a defeat as a slacking off, and life here is still good, if much less strenuous. The house, 25 years or so a-building, is finished now, and though it is much too big for the two of us, on long weekends when friends and children and grandchildren come, it fills up and resounds. Birds and wild beasts surround us as they always have. The creek still flows well much of the time, if not as copiously as it used to (depletio of the aquifer below by multitudinous new wells seems to be the main reason), and I can usually go down with a fly ro and catch supper from it when the notio strikes. Sunrise and sunset are peaceful patches of glory, and if I spend a great deal more time now in reading and contemplation than in wielding hammer an saw and fencing tools, I guess it was tim for such a shift.

Threats loom, of course, for we hav not been granted timelessness in an era ruled by change. The chief such menace for a couple of decades now has been the possibility of a reservoir on the littl Paluxy River, into which our creek flow below the place, a project dear to the hearts of many local boosters. Rationale both for and against it are complex, an I won't delve into them here, but those us who live in the river's valley and lov it and believe that Glen Rose can find it water elsewhere have put up a pretty good fight, a successful one so far.

So yes, change threatens even here. But when and where, these days, does it not? ■
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Graves Ranch. Photo by Bill Wittliff

Booker Hole, Graves Ranch. Photo by Bill Wittliff