

Canyon Lake Community Profile

JOHN GUENZEL

... the music of the river

by Sue Sweat



John Guenzel fell in love with the Hill Country while attending Southwest Texas University (now Texas State) in San Marcos. He and neighbor, Bill Perkins, his business partner, were both working on the river in 1974. They soon opened a small business down at the second crossing, operating The Dry Creek Grocery for five years. In 1976, they opened Rio Raft Company, again at the second crossing and began what was one of just a couple of outfitters at that time. In 1977, they acquired the property on River Road at the fourth crossing, adding RV hook-ups, tent sites, and the camp office and store. John is the proud dad of Marine Corporal Michael Guenzel, currently stationed in Iraq but expected to come home soon. Pride overshadows his concerns; he gently smiles as the conversation quickly turns to Michael's daughter, Kayleigh, whom he describes as "such a joy".

Back then, he says "part of 306 further west was only a dirt road; it didn't go all the way to 281. There were no traffic lights in Sattler and there were still cattleguards on River Road. The entire Lake area has grown so much."

Rio Raft was a family affair in 1977, much like it is now. John's parents, Delitha and the late Henry Guenzel offered a lot support and good advice throughout the years. Bill's parents, George and Betty Perkins were involved hands-on and added the first cabins. Betty, who passed away last month, worked in the office when needed and George became the unofficial greeter. George is retired but still lives upstream on the river.

KXAN-News reports "tens of thousands of people float the Guadalupe and Comal Rivers each year." While the neighboring City of New Braunfels has begun strictly regulating the river within its City limits – building fences, restricting open containers and limiting cooler sizes – these new rules don't affect this part of the River.

The Water Oriented Recreational District (WORD) formed twenty years ago and collects user fees off river traffic, campers and rentals. A portion of that revenue is spent cleaning up the river year round. There is a Boy Scout river clean-up each September. After Labor Day, Rio Raft focuses more on groups. They prepare for the trout fishermen and the Snowbirds who arrive for the winter. A stocking point for Texas Parks & Wildlife and Trout Unlimited, fish from the hatchery are stocked in hopes some of the larger trout will hold over to spawn here.

Rio Raft was the first location to formally welcome Winter Texans. The attendees, presently numbering nearly 300, now fill the Rec Center each year. In March, the 3rd Annual Rio Guadalupe Music Fest is held on the riverbanks. Free admission is included with a two-night cabin rental. At the end of April, they host the 9th Annual Barbeque Cookoff, one of the Chamber's major fundraisers. Since space fills quickly, contestants are limited to first come, first serve. They end the year's events with the 12th Annual Pow Wow, a traditional gathering of American Indians who celebrate their heritage and culture with twenty to thirty tribes represented. Sue Nelson, a registered Choctaw tribal member has been instrumental in organizing the event each year.

Active in the community since the 70's, John served on the Chamber Board for many years, as President in 2002, and more recently on several New Braunfels Chamber committees. He is also a board member of the Gorge Preservation Society, an ongoing project with the Corp of Engineers and the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA), to develop the gorge and create trails. The gorge was created during the flood of July 2002 when Canyon Lake rose an incredible 40 feet in four days and water flowed over the spillway, a first in Canyon Dam history.

Join us. It's going to be a busy season.

For more information, call Rio Raft and Resort at 830-964-3613 or tollfree at 877-746-7238. For pictures of the flood that created the Gorge, visit the Comal County Engineers Office website for photos at www.cceo.com. Memberships are available to help support the effort to develop trails through the Gorge and open it to the public. Call the Chamber for details at 830-964-2223.