

WRITING ON THE WALL:

**Zapata County residents speak up about the wall;
prospect of losing land evokes greater good
takings for 1950s Falcon Dam construction**

By Maria Eugenia Guerra March 21, 2019

María Eugenia (Meg) Guerra has chronicled the news of South Texas and her native Laredo and its residents for more than two decades. María Eugenia (MEG) Guerra is the publisher of Laredo's, A Journal of the Borderlands at laredosnews.com. She is a rancher in Zapata County. She can be reached at meg@laredosnews.com.

ZAPATA – News of border wall construction and the accompanying void of information for where it will be built, continues to foment an atmosphere of uncertainty all along the *frontera* and no less so in Zapata County, which is still in economic recovery from the plummet in natural gas tax revenues from \$300 million a year in 2007 to the present \$20 million a year.

For some Zapata ranchers and hay farmers, the taking of land for the wall for the *greater good* of increased border security resonates with condemnation proceedings and the taking of 87,000 acres of land grant ranches and farms in the early 1950s to build



Zapata County residents, Tent City, 1953

the shallow pan of the Falcon Reservoir. Many Zapata County residents lost their ancestral lands that fronted the river as well as their homes in the condemned and inundated historic Spanish Colonial towns of Old Zapata, Uribeño, Ramireño, Falcón, Lopeño, El Clareño, and El Capitanero.

The taking of those productive, privately-owned river vega lands took with it, too, massive swaths of history, culture, architecture, a local economy dependent on agri-

culture, and Zapata's international bridge.

Many county residents who were displaced back then by flooding caused by the sudden filling of the reservoir lived in a city of military-issue tents for 18 months — suffering the inconvenience, sorrow, and indignity of their losses while the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) dawdled over just compensation.

Though the unarticulated object of the Falcon Dam project was to impound water for the Río Grande Valley's citrus and

vegetable growers at the expense of Zapata County — excluding San Ygnacio — the *greater good* virtues of hydroelectric power generation, conservation, and flood control were the justifications extolled for a bi-national project that bore so vast a devastation of a way of life.

The *greater good* of President Trump's declaration of a national emergency to fund a border wall does not align with Zapata County residents who are calculating what the wall will wreak on personal property, agriculture, a way of life, the ceding of land and water, and wildlife habitat. Nor will it, they say, stop the flow of immigrants or drugs.

"This is nothing less than the fulfillment of a racist campaign promise that will change the lives of millions of Texans who depend on the life-giving Río Grande for water, agriculture, and commerce," said hay farmer Romeo Uribe.

"So huge and determined is this effort that 48 federal laws that protect us, water, land, and wildlife have been waived, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act. The government has a green light to destroy this river," Uribe said.

These are the voices of several Zapata County residents opposed to the declaration of a national emergency and to the construction of a border wall.



Zapata County residents, Tent City, 1953



Zapata County Judge Joe Rathmell

"Agriculture is now the primary business of Zapata County, as it once was. The economic impact of the proposed border wall on ranching would be a hard blow," said Judge Joe Rathmell.

"No one disputes the need for a secure border. Most, if not all ranchers welcome Border Patrol onto their property. Most of those ranchers will tell you the wall is not the answer to increased security," he said, adding, "They will tell you more Border Patrol agents and more technology are a better answer."

Rathmell, a rancher himself — as was his father Jake, who also served as Zapata County judge in the 1970s — runs a commercial cattle operation on family land adjacent to a tract of river vega that he leases from the IBWC.

"Those acres on the river provide water we depend on and grass for the cattle. The loss of access to water and grazing rights would put me out of business," he said, adding, "The economic impact of the wall to ranching would decimate local businesses that provide the goods and services ranchers need."

He said that there may be a change afoot in IBWC's grazing leases, which are billed to the lessee and are renewed by rote by mailing in a check. "I've heard of checks not being cashed and the IBWC not returning phone calls. If there is a policy change, no one has been advised," he said, adding that he has recently asked U.S. Congressman Henry Cuellar for clarification.

Rathmell said the lack of specifics and reliable information about the wall has set many on edge. "Where will the wall be? What is the design? What impact will it have on us and on wildlife?"

Javier Zapata, 60

Rancher, Feed Store Owner

“Cuales asesinos, cuales matones? Es fantasia, y son mentiras.” Zapata Feed Store owner Javier Zapata is unequivocal about the Trump administration’s justifications for the border wall. “And even if it was true that assassins and murderers were crossing the border to kill us, a wall would not stop them,” he said.

He is quick to point out that illegal immigration is not endemic to the border with Mexico. “They come from Canada, they enter at Florida. The whole Gulf Coast is open to undocumented immigrants who enter this country illegally. Are we going to pay for walls everywhere? Why here where the numbers for illegal entry and apprehension have dropped drastically?” he asked.

Zapata farms 230 acres on the river near San Ygnacio.

“I bought this property 13 years ago. I have a \$160,000 investment in tractors and baling equipment so that I can grow and bale about 1,000 round bales a year, some which I feed to my own cattle and the rest to sell at my feed store in Zapata. Part of my land is a peninsula in the river. When the government builds the wall, they won’t follow the shape of my land. They will follow a straight line and cut me off from half of my property. Is that just? I have worked hard to pay for it and to keep it productive. I own 800-acre feet of water rights,” he said, adding, “The hay sales are very important in times of drought, which is often.”

Zapata said that ranchers who are not on the river may say they are for the construction of the wall. “But many of us who have land on the river are not. We use the river to raise crops and to water our cattle. We understand the value of having access to the river. No one wants less security on the border, but do it another way. Use technology, not a wall that will change our lives, take our land, drop our land values, and affect wildlife,” he said.

“The way our land looks and feels to us, the vista from our land to the river will be destroyed. That will have an impact you cannot measure,” Zapata continued.

“The wall will not stop immigrants or contraband. What it will do is make concrete and steel suppliers and contractors

wealthy for life. A wall that costs billions of dollars is a round circle, a business for profit for those chosen for the work. A tunnel under the wall costs a million dollars. By the time that tunnel is discovered, many millions will be recovered in traffic or contraband by the ones who built it.

If the wall is made of steel, torches will cut it. If it’s too high, ladders, ramps, and tunnels will circumvent it,” he said, adding that money for the wall construction could be put to more beneficial use, for education and to feed school children who live in poverty two nutritious meals a day.

“Why is this wall aimed at cattle ranchers and those who raise hay for cattle? We small ranchers feed the nation, and we carry the financial burden of doing it. We buy our own feed and veterinary medicines. We pay for fences on our ranches and make improvements to make our operations more efficient. I work hard to send 80 or 90 calves to the market every year,” Zapata said.

“The president says the wall is a response to an invasion. The Alamo was an invasion. This is not. When Falcon Lake was built, the federal government condemned our farms and ranches on land that had been given to us by the Spanish crown. Now they want more land and to remove us from the water. No es justo.”



Javier Zapata

Luis Lozano

Rancher, Store Owner

“I don’t think they will be on my property to build a wall,” said Lozano, one of the owners of El Campo farm.

“We don’t need a wall. We need more boots on the ground and surveillance equipment. Clear a line of sight on the river vega, but maintain it so it doesn’t wash into the river,” he said.

“The cultivation of El Campo farm goes back six or seven generations in our family. The government took 130 acres from us when the dam was being built. They want more?”



Luis Lozano

The greater good of President Trump’s declaration of a national emergency to fund a border wall does not align with Zapata County residents who are calculating what the wall will wreak on personal property, agriculture, a way of life, the ceding of land and water, and wildlife habitat. Nor will it, they say, stop the flow of immigrants or drugs.

Renato Ramirez, 79

Banker, Rancher

As a banker, and a pivot upon which commerce in Zapata turns, Ramirez is all about numbers, but today the number that's on his mind is the one that has been part of the history and the lexicon of Zapatans since the construction of the Falcon Dam, "the 307" — the IBWC's engineering demarcation for the flood stage of the Río Grande in language that stipulates that the government owns river land below the 307-foot traverse; and that land above the 307, excepting park land, can be privately owned.

Ramirez said that if the wall builders follow the 307 traverse, the wall would encroach upon or cross U.S. Hwy. 83 at Tigre Chico and Tigre Grande creeks, as well as the Veleño, Arroyo el Burro at Ramireño, El Grullo and San Francisco at San Ygnacio, and Dolores near the Zapata-Webb county line.

He said the 314 line is four feet below the top of the dam. "In a flood, the proposed wall would sometimes be under water."

Like many other county ranchers, Ramirez leases land below the 307 from the IBWC for grazing. He has a lease for a 900-acre tract that abuts his property on Veleño Creek, one of the largest water-moving tributaries to the river.

Ramirez ranches on both sides of the Veleño and has built a bridge to reach the leased land below the 307.

He recalled that when the river rose to 305-feet in heavy rains in 2010, it crested just two-feet below the flood level. "Livestock and white tail deer and other wildlife ran to the infertile land of the surrounding hills. We found the 50-pound carcasses of whitetail does that had starved to death. The physical barrier of the wall with its massive

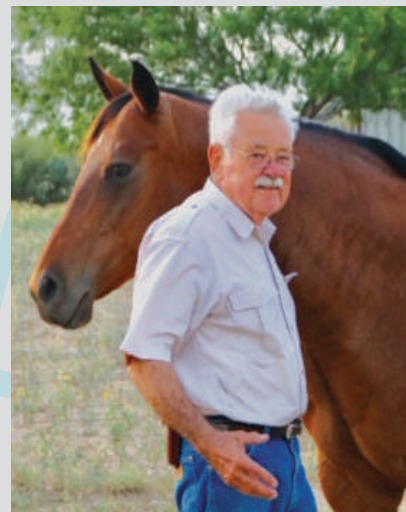
concrete base and the destruction of habitat as it is being built, will affect wildlife populations in unimaginable ways," Ramirez said. "What will it do to hunting, a revenue stream that many ranchers depend on?"

He called the wall "nonsense, a bad message to our largest trading partner with whom we have such an important and longstanding relationship," Ramirez continued, "Mexico is our friend, and beyond that, for many of us Mexico is the country of our origin, and we take pride in that," he said, adding, "The wall will not work to deter drugs that we now know enter the country largely through our ports."

Ramirez said the wall "poses a sad situation for immigrants who come here to work." He continued, "We are not the solution for poverty-stricken populations of the world. We ought to be talking to the governments of those countries to create job opportunities for their citizens. The wall builders will make generous donations to the politicians who gave them the work. This is called graft," he said,

The conversation turned to numbers once more.

"I cleared 600 acres at a cost of \$60,000. Why will it cost the federal government \$43,560 per acre?"



Renato Ramirez

Romeo Uribe, 59

Farmer San Ygnacio

"The Great Wall of China bankrupted the Ming Dynasty. The Maginot Line between France and Germany, though conscripts lived in it, was still permeable, as this proposed wall will certainly be," said Laredo business owner Romeo Uribe who grows and bales Coastal Bermuda hay on 100 acres of the old El Campo farm in San Ygnacio. Proximate landmarks to the site he cultivates are an old white dairy barn, la lecheria, and the San Ygnacio campamento.

Uribe's ties to a love of cultivation go back to his childhood in San Ygnacio and the large vegetable gardens he would undertake. "My mother would drive me and my surplus melons, corn, and squash into Laredo to sell to Cervera's market and to the Colonia Guadalupe for door-to-door sales," he recalled.

He has cultivated watermelon, cantaloupe, and cabbage on a large scale since the mid 1980s in San Ygnacio and on leased land off the Mines Road.

"Hay is an integral part of the cattle business. The 2,000 bales I produce here in two cuts, and the hay my neighbor grows are an

undeniably important food source," he said.

"The wall will deny ranchers riparian rights to water cattle and to irrigate their fields," Uribe said, adding, "And as to needing the wall to stop the flow of illicit drugs, the government's own statistics tell us most of that traffic comes across the international bridges."

The land Uribe leases stretches from U.S. Hwy. 83 and drops to the bank of the Río Grande where his pump sits on a concrete pad.

He said the soil of El Campo is "the richest soil on the face of the earth. Much of the river's alluvial soil will be disturbed during construction of the wall and will erode into the river. "What doesn't wash away will be capped with the concrete of the wall. It will be the undoing of millions of years of geology."

Uribe said that Trump's racism is eclipsed "by his sin verguenza New York contractor overdrive" and his history of using other people's money to make his own.

"Make no mistake," Uribe said, "This wall is about money and little else — yours and mine. A billion dollars is a thousand million dollars. He's asking for \$5.8 billion and another \$6 billion. His track record as a businessman is not good. He has no bounds, and rational judgment is missing from his character," he said.



Romeo and Rolando Uribe



Elsa Hull

Elsa Hull, 50 Environmental Investigator San Ygnacio Viejo Road

Elsa Hull, an environmental investigator with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, believes the hidden beauty of the river lies just outside the windows and doors of her home at land's end on San Ygnacio Viejo Road. "It's right here," she said, "Everything that depends on the river — birds, wildlife."

Hull said there is a measure of disbelief that the wall is an inevitability. "Will they really build it and destroy the riverbanks, the wildlife habitat, and the way of life of so many?"

On a cool morning laced with birdcalls and livestock lowing in the

distance, she provides details of the 20-year relationship she has had with the river, initially further upstream in San Ygnacio for five years and more recently over the last 15 years on the acreage on which she now makes her home about two miles south of San Ygnacio.

On this particular Saturday Hull's daughters, Lena and Iliana, are visiting from Laredo. Over the years, the three have enjoyed kayaking on the river, putting in at the nearby upper fork, which forms a lake that opens into the main channel.

"Being observers of nature in this beautiful place has been good for us," she said, calling the proposed concrete and steel wall "an eyesore that will remove us from the river."

Hull said that trespassers on her property are not people. "They are my neighbors' cattle and sheep, and that is no national emergency."

She advocates for a virtual wall of cameras, sensors, and drones for border security. Hull has firsthand knowledge of the efficacy of electronic sensors. "As an environmental investigator, I cover a 10-county area, much of it on the river. We routinely trip Border Patrol sensors, and they respond immediately," she noted.

She said that the wall is a violation of the rights of those who drink from the river, live on it, and use it recreationally.

"This is a blatant affront, the opposite of taking care of your citizens. This isn't just a bad idea. It is dividing the American people. We should be working together to solve our problems," she said.

Hull has not been contacted by surveyors for access to her property. "They won't get onto it. They'll need a court order," she said.

Hull's voice is tinged with adamancy and conviction, but there's also a timbre of passion to her words. "I am speaking up because I believe in a just environment and human health. If you told me 20 years ago I would still be living on this river I would have told you otherwise. How can you live here and not be against the wall?"

Joel Ruiz, 82 San Ygnacio Rv Park Owner

Joel Ruiz bought the land for an RV park in San Ygnacio while he was in service to the U.S. government as a navigator in the Air Force. After a distinguished career in the Vietnam War, he retired with the rank of Major in 1974, decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross. He said he once flew over San Ygnacio as a civilian pilot, liked the old buildings, and decided to make his home there.

"The wall, if it comes here, will be a hard inconvenience. Those of us with pumps on the river have been assured by Border Patrol that we will still have access through gates, but they won't be handing out keys — that's for sure," he said.

He noted that some San Ygnacio property owners will likely become familiar with the dreaded words "eminent domain."

The native Laredoan said that if the wall traversed the historic part of San Ygnacio, it would spell disaster for the town's historic district of sandstone block structures that date back 200 years. "Especially the Treviño-Urbe Fort, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is just above the drop to the 307," he said.

As Ruiz drives along the river vega below the RV park in an F-150 that is part tackle box and part tool box, he cites chapter and verse the history of the river at San Ygnacio — how a handful of ranchers and veterans saved the town from condemnation and inundation when the

Falcon Dam was being built in the early 1950s, the historic crests of the river, and the relationship of landowners with the bureaucrats of the International Boundary and Water Commission.

He points out the IBWC's 307 line, after which land drops to the verdant riverbank. "The 307 follows the contours of the land and the arroyos. At times the 307 and the 314 meet on maps as the same line. It will be a feat for the wall builders to follow the 307. In a major rain event, water at the 307 covers Hwy. 83 at Arroyo Grullo.

Wherever it is built, they will hit membrillo, the super-hard stone. The disturbance of soil on the vega and above will send a lot of silt into the river," Ruiz said.

"As of now, very little information is known about the wall. Border Patrol consoles us and tells us it may bypass us. Even so, we know this wall is about politics and money — a waste of money, our money. I'd like to see a balanced budget before I see a wall that will enrich a chosen few," Ruiz said.



Joel Ruiz