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**A Road and a River: The Remaking
of Williamson County, Texas, 1948-2000**

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**A Road and a River: The Remaking
of Williamson County, Texas, 1948-2000**

by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

To the memory of Donald Lee Scarbrough, who prodded me to write this story, and Clara Stearns Scarbrough, whose Williamson County history laid this work's foundation.

Acknowledgments

I never could have imagined that so many people would respond so enthusiastically to this project. I cannot possibly thank them all, but I must point out a few whose contribution was beyond measure. Foremost was my dissertation director, Dr. William H. Goetzmann, whose vast storehouse of knowledge and experience provided a firm foundation for this work. Before his untimely death, Robert M. Crunden provided his own brand of inspiration during the formative months of this project. And Walt Herbert plied me with fried catfish and fine ideas along the way. I interviewed many people for this project, and every single one of them was gracious about sharing time, memories, and, often, letters and photographs. A few made huge contributions. These include the Fox clan, especially Carol, Marie, Geraldine and Jim. Without their assistance, I would have gotten nowhere. Similarly, the Honorable J.J. “Jake” Pickle, Tom Kouri, Loretta Mikulencak, Gene Fondren, N.G. “Bunky” Whitlow, “Dot” Labaj Daniel, Opal Wilks and the Roy Gunn family contributed enormously to this project. Newspapers are my business, and I used them extensively. The newspaper archives at the Center for American History in Austin are superlative, and I relied heavily on them. In Williamson County, the *Taylor Daily Press*, *Round Rock Leader*,

and *The Williamson County Sun* allowed me to leaf through bound copies, saving my eyesight and sanity. *Texas Highways* editor Jack Lowrey provided similar access to old runs of his magazine, and the *Austin American-Statesman* let me use its morgue, as well.

I have fallen in love with librarians. In every collection I visited, the keepers of the archives went all out for me. Those who went beyond even that included David Chapman at Texas A&M's Cushing Collection, Ben Rogers at the Baylor University Collections of Political Materials, Ralph Elder at the Center for American History, Linda Briscoe at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center's photo collection, and Linda Seelke at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. When I hit a wall, Tina Houston at the LBJ Library helped me locate Homer Thornberry's papers, which are owned by family members and not open to the public. Under intense time pressure, Barbara Rust, the National Archives' Fort Worth archivist, managed to pull together everything I needed. And at the Taylor Public Library, Mary Jane Richter was a shining jewel.

Active governments store ancient records, if at all, in distant, dusty warehouses. In one such Texas Department of Transportation warehouse I culled through highway builder DeWitt Greer's papers to discover early proposed routes for Interstate 35. Texas Department of Transportation employees John Hurt, Helen Havelka, Larry Jackson, Chris Bishop, Jerry

Tallus, Ann Cook, and Lee Elkins bent over backwards to help me. At the Army Corps of Engineers' headquarters in Fort Worth, Andrew Goss steered me through a confusing maze; at the Brazos River Authority, Mike Bukala let me range through the Authority's exemplary records with perfect freedom. The City of Round Rock, especially City Manager Bob Bennett, provided critical information in a timely and courteous fashion. And at the Williamson County Tax Appraisal District, Karen Vanecek made it a joy to seek ancient maps.

Finally, I thank my family for inspiring this project and patiently living with it to the end. The stories told over the dinner table by my father, Don Scarbrough, planted the seed for this work. Through her work of history, *Land of Good Water*, my mother, Clara Stearns Scarbrough, laid the foundation. Daughter Katherine Alicia Thurmond gave me backrubs at difficult moments. And without Old Hodge, my husband Clark Thurmond, I could have never finished this business.

A Road and a River: The Remaking of Williamson County, Texas, 1948-2000

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Williamson County, Texas, experienced a radical reconfiguration during the last fifty years. In 1948 it was an isolated, agricultural, Democratic stronghold that possessed a rich brew of cultures and economies. In the year 2000 it was among the five fastest growing counties in the United States, suburban, homogeneous, Republican with a high-technology economy. The change occurred largely through two Federal public works projects — Interstate Highway 35 and the damming of the San Gabriel River. Planners failed to predict that the projects would trigger explosive growth, eradicating the agricultural world the dams were designed to protect. This work is a “thick description” of the projects’ environmental, economic, and cultural consequences. In short, it details how suburbia comes into being.

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Introduction

Williamson County, Texas, abuts Austin's northern edge. Indeed, it *is* Austin's northern edge. The county is one of the five fastest growing counties in the United States. Between 1970 and 1980, its population doubled, from thirty-seven thousand (at which it had remained since 1900) to seventy-seven thousand residents. By 1990 it doubled again, to one hundred forty thousand. When the twenty-first century dawned, two hundred and fifty thousand residents lived there. By 2015, Williamson County's population is expected to reach eight hundred and twenty-five thousand.¹

¹U.S. Census: 1900-2000

Fifty years ago, at the Twentieth Century's midpoint, or even thirty years ago, no one imagined such a future — not the nation's most sophisticated planners, not Texas's regional water and transportation gurus, certainly not anyone in Williamson County. As a child growing up in Williamson County during the 1950's, what I loved most about the place was its sweeping landscapes: the rolling black farm land of the county's eastern section, where "King Cotton" made Taylor an economic powerhouse; and the chalky hills of the west side, home to ranchers, livestock and prickly pear cactus. Approaching Georgetown from the east, I always scanned the western horizon for the sinuous "wall" of limestone that jutted two or three hundred feet above the velvet checkerboard of farms hugging its base. We called this the Balcones fault line, though Balcones Escarpment was its proper name. It marked the division between east and west Williamson County — and between the Old South and the American West. Everyone instinctively knew this, though no one discussed it. It was pastoral country, agricultural to the bone. On Williamson County's black farm lands, it was said, a clever farmer could make a comfortable living on rich topsoil forty to sixty feet thick. My mother called it "black gumbo."

The county focused on the San Gabriel River. The river had nourished Indian tribes like the Tonkawas, who marked certain pecan bottoms with bent pecan saplings, a sort of early-day Michelin rating system indicating a promising combination of

abundant springs, shelter and game. A century after the Tonkawas disappeared, many of these signature pecan trees still reared out of the river “bottoms” like arched bows.² The county’s oldest roads followed the San Gabriel and its tributaries: San Gabriel’s North Fork (Booty Road), Brushy Creek from Round Rock to Cedar Park (Harry Mann Road, transmogrified to Hairy Man Road), San Gabriel River (now State Highway 29), Brushy Creek from Hutto to Coupland (Norman’s Crossing Road). These river roads, switching from one bank to the other at low-water crossings, served as *de facto* outdoor parks, where people fished, picnicked, partied, canoed, camped, inner-tubed, and “parked,” snatching a bit of romance. Stories about the county’s history — and its families — revolved around the river’s historic moments, most notably the terrifying floods of 1913, 1921, and 1957.

During my school years in Georgetown, the only towns that really “counted” were Georgetown and Taylor. Georgetown, the county seat, was older but smaller and carried off a “refined” attitude. It was “dry” by choice, proud of its reputation as the

²For all practical purposes, Williamson County’s Native American tribes had vanished by the time Anglo settlers arrived. Presumably most of them died off, or moved on, after being devastated by measles, smallpox, and other diseases brought by the first Europeans to Mexico and Texas. For an excellent study of this phenomenon, see Alfred W. Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 94, 98-99, 196-216. For details about Williamson County’s Native Americans, see Clara Stearns Scarbrough’s *Land of Good Water* (1973), Williamson County Sun Publishers, Georgetown; and Ty Adams, “Archaeologists hit gold mine at site near Florence,” Feb. 25, 2001, Williamson County *Sun*, Georgetown.

“city of churches.”³ Its passions were religion and education. Southwestern University, a small Methodist college, had kept the town afloat during tough times, and during the Depression, when the college couldn’t pay its bills, the town had returned the favor.⁴ The university was Georgetown’s largest private employer. Georgetown enjoyed its religious rivalries, especially between the Methodists and the Baptists, but it was overwhelmingly Anglo and Protestant, a fairly homogeneous community. The ranch patriarchs, however, who came to town every morning at six to drink coffee and swap stories at the L&M Cafe, were a relatively secular bunch: cold, irreverent, or raffish, depending on the moment. They included Jay Wolf, “Fat” Kimbro, Roy Gunn, I.M. Hausenfluck, the Hawes brothers, and “Doc” Weir. As the county government seat, Georgetown had more than its share of lawyers and played a good game of politics. But only one Georgetown political figure stood tall outside Williamson County. He was long-time County Judge Sam V. Stone, whose fame peaked when he beat Lyndon Baines Johnson in Williamson County, but failed to win a seat in Congress.

Taylor, sixteen miles distant, was a geographical and social world apart. It drew farmers in overalls, not ranchers, to town on Saturdays. Taylor worshipped cotton, money, and politics. Its people formed a mosaic of immigrant groups and religions —

³It was also known as “Mistletoe Capital of the World.”

⁴Tyler Woods, “Southwestern almost says ‘Finis’,” Williamson County *Sun*, Georgetown, Sept. 30, 1998, D-7

Czechs, Germans, Swedes, Mexicans, African-Americans and Anglo-Americans; Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. They frequently settled disputes with their fists. Taylor loved beer and barbecue “blowouts,” T-bone steak “stag” dinners, and partying at disreputable honky-tonks along “The Line,” just south of the railroad tracks where most of the city’s Hispanics and blacks lived. A Taylor attorney, Wilson Fox, ran a highly disciplined county Democratic Party machine that delivered such overwhelming majorities (largely courtesy of Czech votes) that it often provided the margin that swayed congressional elections. Lyndon Johnson, Homer Thornberry, and J.J. “Jake” Pickle all entered Congress on the back of Williamson County voters.⁵

As early as the Twenties, when Taylor attorney Dan Moody was elected Texas’s youngest governor, that city of eight or nine thousand wielded a unusual amount of power for a town of its size.⁶ One of Governor Moody’s closest advisers was Richard Critz, who grew up in Granger (another cotton town in East Williamson), moved to Taylor to practice law, and became a Texas Supreme Court judge. One of Critz’s daughters married J.J. “Jake” Pickle, when Pickle was Congressman Lyndon Johnson’s

⁵Interview: J.J. “Jake” Pickle, July 3, 1998, Austin

⁶Moody was a crusading county attorney who made his name in 1923 and 1924 by obtaining convictions against several Ku Klux Klan members in Williamson County. The trials broke the Klan’s domination of Texas government. Moody won the governorship of Texas as a reformist candidate, attacking corruption and racism under Governor Jim “Pa” Ferguson and his wife, Governor Miriam “Ma” Ferguson. See Clara Scarbrough, 376-377, 380-386, and Ken Anderson, *You Can’t Do That, Dan Moody* (1998), Eakin Press, Austin.

advance man. Yet another Moody intimate was his boyhood friend, law partner, and adviser, Harris Melasky, whose clients included Texas' leading oil wildcatters.⁷ Like Governor Moody, Lyndon Johnson depended on Melasky's advice and financial resources.⁸ In 1941, when Johnson was making his first run for the U.S. Senate against W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, he ran out of money for radio advertising. A Johnson aide, John Connally (later Governor Connally), came to Taylor to beg Melasky for help. "How much do you need?" Melasky asked. "Twenty-five should do it," Connally answered. Melasky wrote out a check for twenty-five thousand dollars. Connally stared at the check, pocketed it, thanked Melasky, and departed quickly. He had hoped for twenty-five hundred dollars.⁹

Not only did Wilson Fox control the Williamson County Democratic Party, but, as a former State Representative, he knew everybody in the state capital. A first-rate lawyer, he served as president of the Texas Bar Association.¹⁰ In Taylor, Fox hired a young law partner named Gene Fondren, who won plaudits for his work uncovering insurance scandals for the Texas Legislature and

⁷Anderson, 9, 144-149

⁸Robert A. Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Path to Power* (1983), Vintage Books, New York, 617

⁹Interview: Tom Bullion, May 12, 2000. Bullion became Melasky's law partner in the 1950's and served for many years as Taylor's city attorney.

¹⁰Interview: Dr. Jim Fox, Feb. 16, 2002, Austin

was elected State Representative.¹¹ Eventually, Fondren became the Texas Automobile Dealers Association's chief lobbyist. Today he ranks among the most influential lobbyists in the state.¹²

Taylor enjoyed one other political ace in the hole as well. Banker John H. Griffith was an intimate friend of DeWitt C. Greer, the Texas Highway Department's commander-in-chief. Greer conceived and built Texas' primary highway system and planned and directed Texas' portion of the national interregional highway system. In the Forties, Fifties, and Sixties, Taylor was a politically potent town.

I grew up steeped in these stories. My father, Donald Lee Scarbrough, edited and published Georgetown's Williamson County *Sun*, among other small town newspapers. He and my mother, Clara Stearns Scarbrough, had grown up in Taylor, started the Taylor *Times*, sold it to the Taylor *Daily Press* and bought the *Sun*. Dad lived and breathed stories, relishing the complexities of rural power politics and passing that fascination on to me. In May 1962, I left Georgetown, I thought forever. Interstate 35 was being built, creeping south from Bell County into Williamson County, promising an open road and high-speed trips to Austin and Dallas. A "dam controversy" had raged for years, over whether the U.S. Corps of Engineers should dam the

¹¹The Austin *American-Statesman* named Fondren "Newsmaker of the Year." See Lorraine Barnes, "Taylor Solon Wins Spurs," *American-Statesman*, April 1, 1963, 1.

¹²Dave McNeely, "Dealers' lobby leaves rental cars at starting line," *Statesman*, May 20, 1987

San Gabriel River at Laneport, near the county's far eastern border, covering up two hundred farms owned mostly by Czech families, or west of Georgetown, where my Dad, and most of the county, favored a dam. The contending factions had canceled each other out, and it appeared that neither dam would get built. I was young. I paid little attention.

Sixteen years later, I came home to "take over" the *Sun*.¹³ Many things had changed. The U.S. Corps of Engineers was building two dams on the San Gabriel, one near the river's eastern terminus, the other west of Georgetown. Granger, once a flourishing farm town, was dying. Interstate 35 had swept through, creating Williamson County's second economic boom.¹⁴ Round Rock, a village of a little over two thousand when I left in the early Sixties, had become Austin's first real suburb, host to an enormous Westinghouse manufacturing plant, several new "high-tech" industries, and fifteen thousand people. It was undisputably the county's leading city. The county had doubled in size, making

¹³Though I edited the *Sun* from 1978 to 1990, it was not until 1986 that my husband, Clark Thurmond, and I purchased the paper.

¹⁴The county's first "boom" occurred in the 1890's as a result of the breakup of several ranches on the east side of the county that were subdivided into small farms and sold to European immigrants.

it the second fastest-growing county in Texas.¹⁵ Partly in response to the rapid pace of change, my mother had published a history of Williamson County called *Land of Good Water*, focusing on the county's origins and its development through the early part of the twentieth century. The Texas Historical Association gave the book its highest award.

Through the Eighties, as I edited the *Sun*, many questions nagged at me. Precisely what had thrust the county into overdrive? How had agriculture lost its hold on Williamson County? How had Round Rock, of all places, become the leader of the county's sudden pursuit of modernity? Was Round Rock's success at economic development just a question of Austin's proximity, or was there more to it than that? Had the coming of the interstate automatically rearranged Williamson County's economy and social patterns? Or did the two big dams, and the reservoirs of water they would provide for future growth, make the difference? Would the shift from agricultural to suburban development have taken place without the dams or the interstate highway? Had the planners of these colossal public works projects, which dwarfed everything in Williamson County, understood what changes their engineering would bring? Did the projects' final configurations reflect top-down decisions by Federal bureaucrats who knew little about Williamson County and were focused on some theoretical "big picture"? Or, were the

¹⁵U.S. Census; Clara Scarbrough, 345-346

final flourishes on the lakes and the highway put there by special interests — local boosters and individuals — as some charged? If so, did it matter?

This dissertation grew out of those questions, and my desire to see if answering them might reveal useful patterns for future fast-track development zones, perhaps Williamson County itself. In such fast-growth area, I believe, residents must gain more than extra cash in the bank, or they risk becoming affluent ciphers, lacking that most fundamental American virtue — civic responsibility. The founding fathers believed local government should “check” Federal government. Healthy local communities keep the nation sound. A community is not city government; rather, the people who exchange opinions across the fence and at the grocery store are the real community, our societal glue. If local communities fail, so too, I believe, will the nation.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite an explosive economic and population boom that brought with it a wave of wealth, Williamson County was in some ways a poorer place to live than fifty years earlier. People’s sense of community had eroded, as well as their sense of place. Political leaders privately fretted over this conundrum, as they publicly grappled with the overriding issues of the day: overwhelming traffic jams, a looming water crisis, urban crime patterns. Interestingly, today’s county and municipal leaders lean toward the same types of “fixes” that created the interstate and dams — expensive public

works projects and faith in regional planning “experts.” Some argued that these “meta” fixes had not worked and should not be repeated.

Other forces were in play, too. Some groups hoped to stop growth entirely by foregoing a highway here, a dam there. Some worked at creating “pockets of preservation” within the county’s charming old towns or along scenic back roads. Some developers and local leaders, especially in Georgetown, were trying to adapt “New Urbanist” notions to a suburban landscape. Others still (notably Georgetown’s Sun City residents) were using the tactics of California’s tax rollback promoters to reject school, library and parks bond proposals, and recall a controversial mayor. A workable synthesis was lacking. Often, those pushing policies of change did not know why or how the county got where it is today. But if their proposals are to enhance Williamson County’s environmental health — its sense of community and place — they must know these things.¹⁶

I hope that this work will encourage thinking about the importance of place, so intrinsic to a strong sense of community.

¹⁶James Kuntsler, *Home From Nowhere* (1998), Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, New York

Other counties across America, especially those considering the value of large public works projects, might utilize this study, especially as global and national forces increasingly drive our economy but erode the viability of small, individualistic localities. A tolerable sense of place, I think, includes not only one's feeling for physical landmarks (environmental and architectural landscapes), but also an understanding of a place's economic, ethnic, and cultural context in history. With this in mind, I will dissect the two Federal engineering experiments that reinvented Williamson County. Federal government forces wanted two seemingly simple things: a road and a dam. The road was to be U.S. Interregional Highway 35, which ultimately linked Mexico with Canada, created new suburban markets, transformed the trucking and railroad industries, and eradicated Williamson County's existing economic, cultural, ecological, demographic and political patterns. The dammed river was the San Gabriel, which engineers plugged at two points, making it one of the shortest rivers in the United States whose waters are impounded by two multi-purpose dams. The dams provided the water that fueled the county's growth binge, which probably will continue well after the water is gone.

By putting these projects under a microscope, I hope to achieve what anthropologist Clifford Geertz termed a "thick

description” of cultural environment.¹⁷ I aim to bore deep into the political, social, economic, and environmental ramifications of Williamson County’s road and river projects. My hope is that this study will help readers better understand how local environmental, cultural and economic histories nurture our “sense of place” — the sense that brings wisdom to our decisions about the future. Without this foundation of understanding, any attempt to “develop” or, conversely, to “control growth,” must fail.

The work is divided into two parts. Part I, “The River,” surveys Williamson County’s geographic, geological, and environmental history; tells the story of the flood of 1921, when 38.21 inches of rain fell in twenty-four hours, sending the San Gabriel River on a rampage that killed more than a hundred and fifty people; and details how that flood drove the local and national debate over damming the San Gabriel for fifty years, resulting in construction of two dams. Part II, “The Road,” focuses on Interstate 35, from its origins in the German *autobahn* to its 1968 completion through Williamson County. I will show that the interstate’s earliest proposed route would have passed by Taylor, but shifted twelve miles to the west, overturning the economic and political power systems in the county; and how a meticulously planned sequence of interchanges was altered by

¹⁷Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) Basic Books, Inc., New York, 5-28

efforts of individual property owners. An epilogue brings the reader up to date with a brief survey of the consequences, mostly unintended, of the San Gabriel River dams and Interstate 35.

Along the way, I have considered, and rejected, several theoretical explanations for Williamson County's road and river tale. Some theories illuminate the story, but none completely explains it. For example, it is perfectly true, as philosopher Henri Lefebvre observes, that one can "produce" or experience space in three ways: abstract, lived, and mythical. The abstract production types (architects, engineers, bankers, politicians, planners) dominate other space users in the West, such as farmers (who massage the Earth's natural rhythms) and movie makers (myth-makers).¹⁸ Lefebvre's theory nicely applies to the U.S. Corps of Engineers and the Czech farmers of Williamson County. But it fails to explain key elements of Williamson County's experience.

One could argue that Williamson County fused Old South neocolonialism and Old West longings until the new dams and road eliminated the remnant cultures, which were replaced by a post-modern sort of placelessness, wherein Dell Computer's stock price constitutes the only reality. This is partly true, but it would be a gross simplification to pretend it constitutes the whole story.

¹⁸Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space* (1974), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 64

Ultimately, this is a story of “elite” groups struggling for power: the Army Corps of Engineers, representing the federal government, versus Williamson County’s contending “elites” versus Texas’ “elite” rice planters and Dow Chemical, whose water rights and economic clout made even Senator Lyndon Johnson jump. But didn’t Mother Nature, the ultimate environmental arbiter, dump thirty-eight inches on Williamson County and, some years later, cause a seven-year drought, trumping the plans of mere “elite” humans? In more than a casual sense, the environment itself — however we may have altered it — wields ultimate power.

Williamson County’s surgical makeover at the hands of a strong central government is a story about the effects of bureaucracy and politics on environment. In this work, I define environment broadly, not only through ecological and morphological signposts, but also through cultural, ethnic and economic ones. This is a tale of federal decision-making tempered by local forces and a chain of unintended consequences. For instance, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed to dam the San Gabriel River to help farmers — at least, that was the rationale they used to sell Congress on the idea. But the dams they built permanently flooded the county’s prime farm land, the most productive non-irrigated agricultural land in Texas. This work cautions against the “big” solutions our society

so often embraces at significant cost to our local environments and our sense of place.

This “thick description” of Williamson County’s road and river projects finds a surprisingly high degree of give and take — horse trading, really — between big government and local forces, elite and otherwise. Time and time again, local individuals forced Federal and state engineers to abandon, redesign or postpone pet projects. These citizens imperfectly bent national policy toward what they believed was Williamson County’s best interests. Some were “boosters”; some hoped for personal gain; several possessed extraordinary vision. I am tempted to label them local heroes.

These local folks had one thing in common: they anticipated the future far more accurately than did the professional planners. In the end, the projects that were built — Interstate 35 and the San Gabriel River dams — represented a convergence of interests between a small rural county, state and regional power brokers, and the nation’s top civil engineers. For better and for worse, those compromises led directly to Williamson County’s astonishing metamorphosis at the end of the twentieth century.

Prologue

Lay of the Land

Seventy million years ago, earthquakes ripped up and down the belly of Texas, which lay at the bottom of a shallow sea. The quakes produced a line of faults along which volcanic mountains thrust up and westward, spilling ancient seabeds down the mountains' eastern scarps. The faulting stopped some twenty-one million years ago; the sea retreated southeastward to become the Gulf of Mexico; and the Balcones Escarpment remained to remind

us of those ancient geological changes.¹⁹ Since then, rivers running through the hills and cliffs west of the fault zone have dumped billions of tons of rich clay silt on the lands just below, creating a motherlode of fertility twelve hundred to fifteen hundred feet deep.²⁰ Thus was created the Blackland Prairie — “Black Waxy” to early Anglo-American settlers — which Texas politicians and farmers recognized as their most important agricultural resource. “Nearly every foot of its area is susceptible to a high state of cultivation, constituting one of the most extensive continuous agricultural regions in the United States,” a scholar wrote in 1889.²¹ A farmer’s wife said it more pungently: “You can make a better living by accident on the blackland than you can by trying on sandy soil.”²²

Long before farmers arrived, a tiny band of shipwrecked Spanish sailors led by Cabeza de Vaca escaped from their Karankawa captors and struck northwest in 1535 from the Gulf of Mexico, meandering across Texas in an effort to reach their compatriots.²³ After marching for days across a rolling grassy

¹⁹Some geologists believe this process stopped twenty-four million years ago. See Austin *American Statesman*, Sept. 26, 1999, K-3

²⁰*Statesman*, *ibid.*

²¹Robert T. Hill, “Roads and Material for their Construction in the Black Prairie Region of Texas,” *Bulletin of the University of Texas*, Dec. 1889, 18

²²Neil Foley, *The White Scourge*, University of California Press, Berkeley (1997), 32. The quotation came from folklorist William Owens, who was retelling his mother’s old saying.

²³T.R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star* (1983) American Legacy Press, New York, 23; A. Garland Adair and Ellen Bohlender Coats, *Texas Its History* (1954), John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, 20-22

prairie, they saw a serpentine escarpment running southwest to northeast — the first high country the Spaniards had seen in Texas. Its dusky green rim, which stretched three hundred miles across the western horizon, reminded them of a theater balcony, *balcones* in Spanish. And so it came to be called — Balcones Escarpment.²⁴

Nor could de Vaca's men and subsequent explorers fail to notice a thick band of deep, unconscionably rich black clay soil hugging the eastern side of the rift's spine. This fabulous earth thinned out, after thirty miles or so, into a less fertile and much larger bench of sandyland prairie.²⁵ West of the Balcones Escarpment they found a massive shelf of honeycombed limestone, covered by the thinnest layer of caliche soil, which stretched a hundred and fifty miles west, forming what we know as the Edwards Plateau. The ancient faulting that had created the escarpment produced fissures through which thousands of springs seeped, feeding rivers that had cut deep canyons through the upland side of the escarpment. East of the escarpment, the rivers sprawled into a maze of streams that undulated through rich fertile lowlands to the coast. Spain staked its first Texas missions on the Balcones at what became the city of San Antonio,

²⁴Clara Stearns Scarbrough, *Land of Good Water*, Eakin Publications, Austin (1973), 6, 8. The Balcones Escarpment was first named on Roemer's map in 1847, but apparently that had been the usage for many years. (Scarbrough cites E.H. Sellards and C.L. Baker, *Geology of Texas II*, (1934), University of Texas Press, Austin

²⁵Foley, *ibid.*, 16; Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 3, 6; Tom Fowler, "Geography Primer," Williamson County *Sun* Sesquicentennial Edition, Sept. 30, 1998, A-4

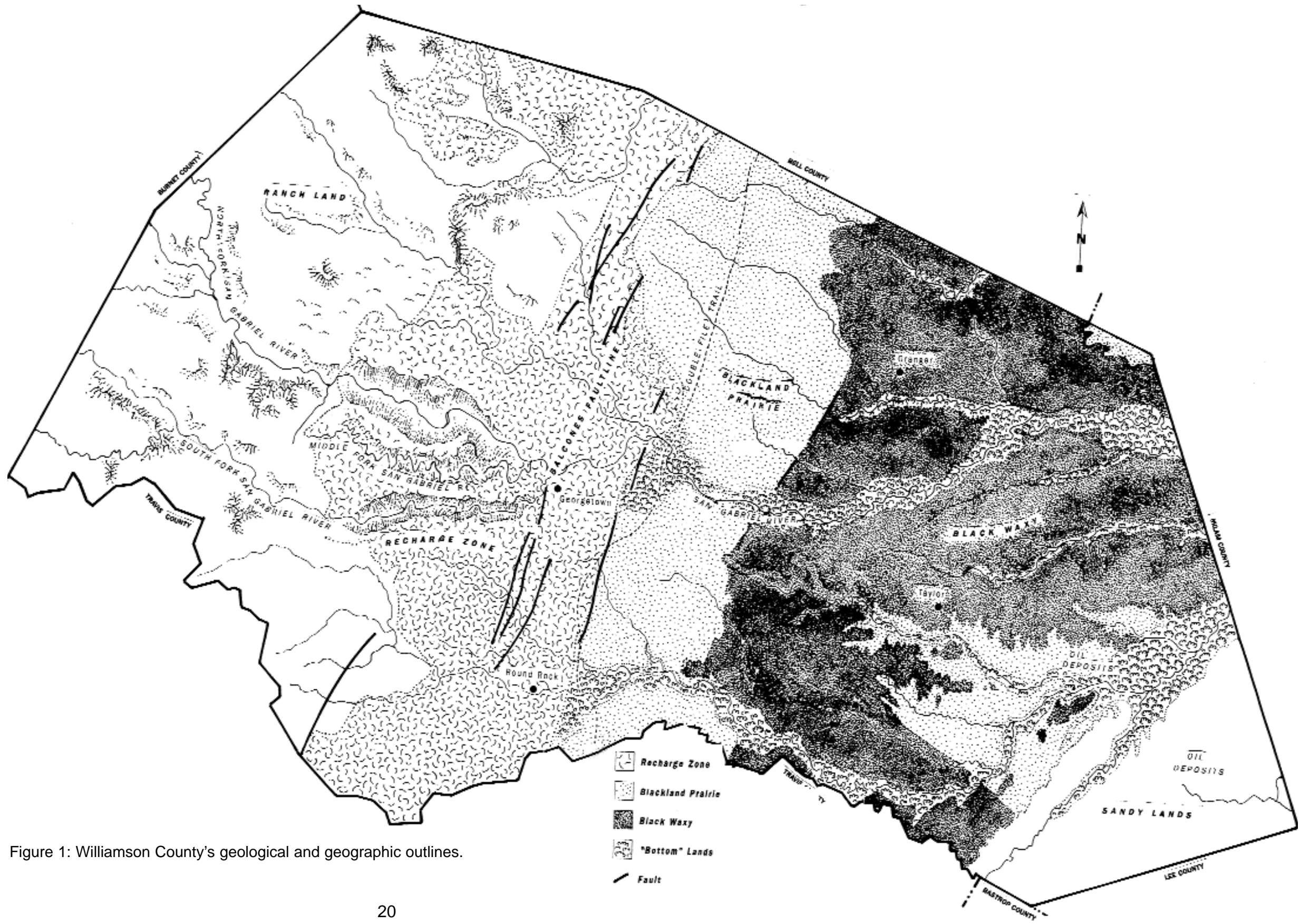


Figure 1: Williamson County's geological and geographic outlines.

tapping the San Pedro springs to feed a system of *asequias*, or canals, which watered the colonists' first farms and orchards.²⁶

By chance, a good part of the Balcones Escarpment roughly follows the 98th meridian, where “the region of assured rainfall ends and the arid region begins.”²⁷ West of the Balcones lies poor soil and little water — ranch country typical of the American West. East of the Balcones is the Texas version of the Farm Belt. West of the Balcones, one cannot farm for long without irrigation. East of it, one assuredly can — and on one of the richest strips of soil in North America.

The Balcones Escarpment made another geological mark on the topography of Texas: it uncovered a pencil-thin landform called the Austin Chalk, wedged between the Balcones Escarpment and the Blackland Prairie. The Austin Chalk is composed of pressed layers of the hardened skeletons of primeval sea creatures. Their tiny fossilized bodies make splendid footing for roads. From the time Europeans arrived, they followed the Chalk's firm path, giving rise to Texas' most important inland routes and cities.²⁸ The dozen or so cattle paths that collectively became

²⁶*Final Environmental Statement: Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes, San Gabriel River, Texas* (1972), U. S. Army Engineer District, Fort Worth, Texas, II-1, II-9; J. R. Barnes, hydrologist, personal correspondence, Sept. 24, 1973, held by author; “Carved in Stone,” *Austin American Statesman*, Sept. 26, 1999, K-3; Fowler, *ibid.*; Scarbrough, *ibid.* 3-10

²⁷William E. Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, The Macmillan Co., New York (1907), 21

²⁸E. Charles Palmer, “Land Use and Cultural Change Along the Balcones Escarpment: 1718-1986,” *Balcones Escarpment, Central Texas*, Patrick L. Abbot and C. M. Woodruff, Jr., eds., Geological Society of America

known as the Chisholm Trail, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad, State Highway 81 and, finally, Interstate 35 linked along the Austin Chalk and helped develop San Antonio, Austin, Waco, Dallas, and Fort Worth — all creatures of strategic placement along the Balcones Escarpment and Blackland Prairie.²⁹

The Blackland Prairie's thick "black gumbo" soils, however, resisted builder and engineer. Depending on the weather, its clays shrink or expand six to eight inches a year — a road builder's nightmare. "In winter time and at other seasons of rainfall the rich clay soil is kneaded into a tenacious paste, through which even an empty vehicle can be pulled only with great difficulty The roads become sloughs of despond," wrote road geologist Robert T. Hill in 1889.³⁰ Nothing much has changed. Though one major north-south artery, Highway 95, and the M-K-T railroad created a strip of cities that grew wealthy, in their time, from the "black waxy's" cotton and corn yields, the Blackland Prairie's geological realities resisted road builders and urban development but was perfect for intensive, dense agricultural habitation.

(1986), 153-162; *Statesman*, *ibid.*, K-3; Fowler, *ibid.*, A-5; Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 4

²⁹The Balcones Escarpment burrows underground north of Waco, but Blackland Prairie is at its broadest width around Dallas and Fort Worth, encompassing Collin, Grayson, Hunt, Fannin and Lamar counties. See Foley, *ibid.*, 16, and T. U. Taylor, "Country Roads," *Bulletin of the University of Texas*, March, 1890, 5

³⁰ Hill, *ibid.*, 18; Fowler, *ibid.*, A-4, A-5

Williamson County, a Rhode Island-sized rumped rectangle, sits north of Travis County, the seat of the Texas Capitol in Austin. It is an 1848 spinoff of Milam County, originally a vast area claimed by the Spanish crown, that straddles the Balcones Escarpment.³¹ Like other Texas counties split by the fault line, Williamson County developed in its first century as a model of balanced agricultural economy, mixing cattle ranching on the Hill Country west of the Balcones Escarpment and cotton and corn on the Coastal Plains.³²

In the last fifty years, the old agricultural patterns have given way to new ones: suburbia's spread of subdivision-style "ranchettes" has replaced cattle ranching, though agriculture still rules the Blackland Prairie, with fields of maize and cotton augmented by small cattle herds grazing on "improved" (that is, seeded) pastures. From a stable agrarian population that reached nearly forty thousand in 1900 and then froze for seventy years, since 1970 Williamson County's population has doubled,

³¹Mrs. Jeff. T. Kemp, "Significance and Origin of the Names of the Rivers and Creeks of Milam County," 1929, Center for American History, Austin. Eventually, Milam County was carved into thirty-two Texas counties, including Williamson. Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 71, 75, 114-115

³²Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 3-5; Fowler, *ibid.*, A-4.

redoubled and undoubtedly will double again. In the year 2000, it was one of the five fastest growing counties in the United States, with two hundred and fifty thousand citizens. Projections show it reaching eight hundred and fifty thousand by 2015.³³

The county's earliest towns lined up on two routes: the earliest following the Balcones Escarpment, on the chalk, from Austin to Round Rock to Georgetown to Temple; and along the Blackland Prairie where in 1876 and 1882 railroad lines were laid, linking the Blackland crop harvests to Houston and San Antonio via Bartlett, Granger and Taylor. The county seat, Georgetown, hugs the Balcones, as does Round Rock, whose population since the seventies has burgeoned from twenty-eight hundred to sixty-five thousand to dominate Williamson County.³⁴ The Blackland sprouted Taylor, the county's financial and political capital for nearly a century, along with Granger, Bartlett, Hutto, Thrall, Thorndale and Coupland — all threaded together by two intersecting railroad lines and two intersecting highways, 79 and 95.

³³U.S. Census 2000

³⁴1970 Census of the Population, May 1973, Vol. I, Part 45, U.S. Department of Commerce, 45-44 Texas, Table 10



City Hall, Taylor, Tex.

Figure 2: Taylor City Hall, site of civic and cultural events was razed, in 1935.



Figure 3: Czech farmers roll into Granger to market their cotton in the 1930's.

The Balcones Escarpment broke Williamson County into two parts, but the San Gabriel River stitched it back together, giving it its two most valuable assets: soil and springs. Without the San Gabriel River, the fertile lowland soil would not exist: the river washed eons of accumulated alluvia from the broken fault zone. But without the hinging action of the earthquake epoch, the county's springs, and the river, could not have been created. It is all of a piece. The escarpment begat the springs and the river, and these begat the soil that lured would-be farmers from Germany, Sweden, and most especially, Moravia and Bohemia. That soil and these springs made the first Williamson County — agrarian Williamson County — which lasted a century and still dominates the landscape on the county's east end. When white men first arrived in Williamson County, the springs numbered in the thousands: as late as 1960, two hundred bubbled and dripped within seven miles of Georgetown alone.³⁵ These springs meant good water for prospective farmers, ranchers and townspeople. It was not for nothing that the Tonkawas, who hunted bison in Williamson County long before the Spanish surveyed it, called their home *takachue pouetsu*, land of good water.³⁶ Rains came to the *takachue pouetsu* in quantities that satisfied the nomadic Tonkawa and the county's earliest European farmers — thirty-two inches on average, a little higher on the eastern Blackland Prairie,

³⁵Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 5

³⁶*Ibid.*, 25

lower to the west. There were years of scant rainfall, but sometimes it rained so hard that rivers and creeks spread out for miles, adding still more inches of rich silt to the alluvial plain.³⁷

The permeable limestone of the county's western half masks hundreds, perhaps thousands of caves, natural pipelines for underground rivers. This made for picturesque panoramas of live oak, cacti and bluebonnets — a landscape that inspired the image of a mythic Texas — but it was poor country for farming or even profitable ranching. Most settlers avoided it if they could, preferring the San Gabriel Valley's rich alluvial delta. In the Twenties, boosters dubbed Taylor “the largest inland cotton market in the world,” erecting a sign on the City Hall lawn to that effect. They had reason. The city of six thousand sat snugly in the heart of Blackland Prairie. A major switching point for two national rail lines, Taylor linked Dallas, Austin, San Antonio and Houston. In 1915, oil fields were discovered nearby, and another oil field was struck in 1930. Family fortunes were made and Taylor boomed, giving it political connections and economic power that pulsed into the 1960s as far away as Washington, D.C.³⁸

³⁷*Final Environmental Statement*, *ibid.*, II-10

³⁸Ruth Mantor, *Our Town: Taylor*, First-Taylor National Bank (1983), Taylor, 7; *Welcome to Taylor*, Taylor Daily Press (1994), Taylor, 24; Neil Foley, *White Scourge*, University of California (1997), 29-32; *Taylor Daily Democrat*, “Taylor, the Biggest Little City,” Jan. 24, 1923, reprinted in *Taylor Times*' Williamson County Centennial issue, March 18, 1948; Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 302-303, 324, 328-330, 458-459

To European peasants, often on the point of starvation and embittered by centuries of working other people's land, Texas' Blackland Prairie, which they heard about through relatives' letters, newspaper articles and proselytizing religious leaders, sounded like heaven on earth. Williamson County's "black waxy" attracted German, Wend and Swedish families yearning to till soil they owned, but the Europeans who most definitively stamped their imprint on the new land came from Bohemia and Moravia, lands comprising the "Czech" portion of Czechoslovakia after World War I. From the 1860s on, steamship companies ferrying Czechs across the Atlantic Ocean promoted the Blackland Prairie: "Texas soil: black topsoil six feet in depth," gushed one steamship line poster at its office in Bohemia.³⁹ As peasant life in the Hapsburg Empire's westernmost lands deteriorated, especially between 1880 and 1900, Eastern European peasants sailed across the Atlantic, landed at Galveston and rode the new rail lines into several Blackland Prairie "nodes," including Williamson County's Granger, a "seedbed" for immigrant Czech families, and Taylor, where by 1900 the Czech influence was "prominent."⁴⁰ Freed from the Hapsburg Empire's oppressive treatment, the Texas Czechs hired themselves out, saved their money and within a few years bought farms of one or two hundred acres on the fabled Blackland Prairie. Their farms became models of intensive

³⁹Clinton Machann and James W. Mendl, *Krásná Amerika: A Study of the Texas Czechs*, Eakin Press, Austin (1983), 18-22

⁴⁰Machann, *ibid.*, 48

cultivation, mixing row crops, livestock, grapes and truck gardening. Every member of the family labored for the collective enterprise, and they were successful beyond their wildest expectations.

In Texas, almost all Czech immigrants came from the *chalupník*, or “cottager” class. In Europe, *chalupníks* owned tiny homes but no land, working large landlords’ fields for shares of the crop. Locked in debt by a corrupt feudal system and sometimes on the verge of starvation, a *chalupník’s* greatest desire was to own land — which would not only lift his family from poverty to economic security but also convey on it the political and social respectability reserved in Europe for land owners. This accruing collection of benefits led immigrating Bohemians and Moravians to an intense sort of “land worship,” a “reverence” for the soil that is hard to exaggerate and difficult for modern Americans to comprehend.⁴¹

On the Blackland Prairie, these new Americans gained what they had most desired — freedom from an oppressive feudal system, economic security and the ability to recreate their traditional cultural institutions in a new land. On Williamson County’s Blackland Prairie, they made Granger one of the “most Czech” of Texas towns, driving its robust growth after 1882, when it was laid out as a railroad depot stop; founded three

⁴¹Robert L. Skrabanek, “The Influence of Cultural Backgrounds on Farming Patterns in a Czech-American Rural Community,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 1951, V. 31, 258-266; Machann, *ibid.*, 74-75

villages — Friendship, Mochu and Moravia — near Granger on the San Gabriel River's northern flank; and became merchants, mechanics and a potent voting bloc in Taylor, as that city strove to overtake Temple as the premiere city between Waco and Austin.⁴²

Where they clustered, the Czechs founded schools, churches, fraternal organizations, mutual insurance societies and newspapers. As a distinct people, they emphasized group solidarity and economy.⁴³ *Nasinec*, the official organ of the Catholic Czech Church of Texas, was printed in Taylor from 1916 until 1937 and then moved to Granger, where it continues to be published on Davilla Street. It is America's only Czech-language newspaper.⁴⁴ Williamson County's Blackland Prairie proved hospitable to the Czechs, who remade it into their Promised Land. Though waves of Germans, Swedes, Wends, Mexicans and Anglo-Americans (largely from Tennessee, Alabama and Illinois) also farmed the Blackland Prairie, and some accumulated more wealth than their Bohemian and Moravian neighbors, in Williamson County it was the Czechs who most successfully created a culture that combined their homeland social and religious life with their aspirations as Americans.⁴⁵

⁴²Ibid.,47-48

⁴³Barbara McCandless, *Equal Before the Lens* (1992), Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 4

⁴⁴Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.* 220, 222

⁴⁵Machann, *ibid.*, 4-7, 9-18, 48

Twenty miles to the west, on the other side of the Balcones divide, a few hardy Anglo-Americans (most of them stemming from Irish, English, or Scots origins) started drifting over the northern ridge of Austin's Mexican land grant colony in the 1830s. Remnants of the planter class from Tennessee, they settled in the creeks and river valleys and along the Double File Trail, a trail blazed by Delaware Indians in the 1820s. In 1838, Swedish immigrants arrived; a decade later, an extended Illinois family encouraged other Yankee relatives to follow. The wealthiest among them established farms on the Blackland or built stage stops at Brushy Creek (which became Round Rock), Bagdad (which became Leander), Liberty Hill and Towns Mill, which vanished after a 1921 flood. Others scratched out plaintive livings on pockets of fertile river bottom along the San Gabriel River's two western forks and along Brushy Creek and Berry Creek. Mostly these pioneers barely clung to their land, calling themselves stockmen, farmers, mustangers.⁴⁶ In 1848, Williamson County was carved from Milam County and Georgetown became its county seat — the result of an enterprising land “boomer” with close ties to the Texas Legislature⁴⁷.

⁴⁶Scarborough, *ibid.*, 72-87

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 124-125. The land “boomer” was George Washington Glasscock, who owned virtually all the land that would become the county seat. Georgetown, then, became Glasscock's namesake and made his fortune.

After the Civil War, hundreds of Williamson County stockmen, hardened and sharpened by their military experience, joined an entrepreneurial wave which made cattle barons out of a few, land-poor cattle ranchers out of the rest. They did this by capturing enormous herds of wild longhorn cattle that had multiplied during the war, and driving the longhorns over dangerous trails to Kansas, where the beeves were shipped to Eastern markets. John W. Snyder was a prime example of the type. As a young boy, he cut his teeth as a trader by selling twenty-five bushels of apples he purchased in Missouri along a wagon trip to Round Rock. After acting as an army supply agent during the Civil War, he (and his two brothers) amassed enormous ranches in Williamson County, Colorado and Wyoming. He testified before Congress for the cattle industry and was pictured on an 1886 post card bearing the portraits of five "Cattle Kings." After his retirement, Snyder generously supported the infant Southwestern University and Georgetown's First Methodist Church.

After the cattle drives ended in the 1890's and barbed wire fenced the free range, Williamson County drovers like Willis Thomas Avery, George Washington Cluck and Greely Weir invested profits from the drives in ranches on the big limestone ledge west of the Balcones Escarpment.⁴⁸ By that time, old-line stockmen were "subdividing" their Blackland Prairie holdings to

⁴⁸Ibid., 200-203

Czech and German farmers, who could wring bigger profits out of the fertile soil growing cotton than stockmen could raising beef. But the ranches established on the quirky limestone west of the Balcones Escarpment “wore out” rather quickly. The cattle stripped the native buffalo grass and bluestem from the thin topsoil, which washed down the San Gabriel, adding to the deep Blackland Prairie deposits or flowing on to the gulf.⁴⁹ Still, the old cattle “barons” and their less successful country cousins, the ranchers, with their thousand-acre spreads and a few dimes in their pockets, cut an heroic image within Williamson County’s social firmament. Their social standing towered above that of the inbred German Lutherans and Czech Catholics who cultivated their modest farms to get the most out of every inch of fabulous dirt and were viewed, by the Anglo majority, as curiosities — “tight” with their money, “clannish” in their society, religiously devout, farmers who built church schools for their children and continued speaking German or Czech, who drank beer, made plum brandy and celebrated odd European folk festivals in fancy dress. Compared to the ranchers — a society of tight-lipped individuals attending Methodist or Baptist churches in town, where drink was forbidden, though not entirely unknown — it all seemed strange and a bit threatening. The Germans and Czechs raised three or more generations of farmers, for their old “land

⁴⁹John Graves, *Goodbye to a River*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York (1983) 86, 128,132, 215-216

worship” values were successfully passed down. They also raised a disproportionate number of doctors, teachers and lawyers. Outside their ethnic enclaves, they were often admired but rarely emulated. Deep down in their hearts, practically everybody else in Williamson County yearned to own a ranch — to have a little of the cattle-baron glamour rub off on them.⁵⁰

As Donald Meinig wrote in his pathbreaking cultural geography of Texas, “It was of course a contrast between a strongly rural, militantly independent, mobile, and aggressive people nurtured on the frontier, and a strongly community-minded people drawn from the rigidly ordered countrysides and villages of Europe who came in groups and clung together as an alien minority.”⁵¹ He was describing the Anglo ranchers who dominate the Edwards Plateau west of Austin and the German burghers of Fredericksburg and New Braunfels, but his generalization perfectly fits Williamson County. Meinig also observed that Central Texas “displays the full range of intercultural tensions which are so important a part of Texas life.”⁵² In Williamson County, those “intercultural tensions” — especially between Czech farmers and Anglo ranchers — played a profound role in the response of the citizenry at mid-20th century when two enormous public works projects — a superhighway and

⁵⁰Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 195-213; Snyder biography, “Cattle Kings” post card, 1886, Center for American History, Austin

⁵¹D. W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas*, University of Texas Press, Austin (1969), 54

⁵²Meinig, *ibid.*, 123

a “new” river — were proposed. They saw, albiet dimly, that these projects would overturn old patterns and lay the foundations for a new Williamson County.

Its only river, the San Gabriel, connect Williamson County’s two distinct parts. Just west of the county line, in Burnet County, it rises in two forks from underground springs and runs transparent over limestone riverbeds through the canyon country west of the Balcones Escarpment, shaping the cattle ranches and thick stands of cedar and oak that still anchor a landscape that is fast becoming a sea of suburbia. It cuts through limestone cliffs dripping with springs and pockmarked by wildflowers. Sometimes a flat piece of alluvial soil spreads out into a fan-shaped pasture or truck garden. The San Gabriel’s two big forks converge at Georgetown, absorbing a third Middle Fork. Before reaching Georgetown, the river falls over a steep grade; but after passing the county seat its gradient flattens and the river lolligags its way through sixty-two miles of undulating coastal plain. It ends just across the eastern boundary of Williamson County at a hamlet appropriately named San Gabriel, established in 1747 as the

Spanish mission San Xavier.⁵³ From start to finish, the river's elevation falls sharply from fifteen hundred feet above sea level in the highlands to five hundred and fifty feet at San Gabriel. Crossing the county, it deposits the precious silt that made Taylor and its satellites wealthy for a century. It picks up a dozen tributaries, the most important being Brushy Creek, before entering a confusing jumble of streams and joining the Little River in Milam County to the southeast, which shortly merges with the Brazos River.⁵⁴

Williamson County sits in one of those odd crooks of the world known to geologists as "weather makers."⁵⁵ The Balcones Escarpment stands at the western edge of a long smooth plain that tapers down to the Gulf of Mexico. When a tropical storm swirls out of the gulf, it roars for hundreds of miles across that smooth expanse until it meets the Balcones, the first piece of significant topography in Texas. According to a geographer who has made the Balcones his life's work,

⁵³Kemp, *ibid.* According to this researcher, the San Gabriel River was named San Francisco Xavier in 1716 by Spanish explorers Espinosa and Ramon. "The name San Gabriel seems to be an American corruption of San Xavier," she wrote, adding that Austin's original map, dated 1829, inscribed it San Javriel, which became San Gabriel.

⁵⁴*Final Environmental Statement*, *ibid.*, II-10

⁵⁵Another such place is Cherrapunji, on the southern slope of the Himalaya Mountains, which on June 14, 1876, got 40.8 inches of rain in one day. This tidbit appeared in the *Taylor Daily Press* on Sept. 13, 1921, after it rained thirty-two inches in twelve hours at Thrall, 38.2 inches within twenty-four hours, a national record.

The area along the Balcones Escarpment is the locus of the greatest frequency of flood-producing storms in the United States. The air masses hit the escarpment and rise ever so slightly. It's already unstable, so that's all it takes to set it off. This particular place is a place that can really get you.⁵⁶

Combine this pattern with a low pressure system holding steady west of the Balcones Escarpment and storms of exceptional strength and duration can form. Such storms' effects are often magnified by the fact that rivers crossing the Balcones fall rapidly — in Williamson County about five hundred and fifty altitudinal feet — until encountering the coastal plain, where a flooding river can breach its banks in a breathtakingly short time and spread out for miles. Williamson County saw the normally somnolent San Gabriel River behave this way in 1869, 1900, 1913, 1921 and 1957 — most especially in 1921, when ninety-two people in Williamson County drowned.⁵⁷

Two decades after the 1921 debacle, an obscure real estate salesman made it his life's quest to dam the San Gabriel above Georgetown. As science and as literature his description of Williamson County's flood plight leaves something to be desired, but as political theater, it worked. For thirty years, in various forms, Owen W. Sherrill relentlessly repeated the same thing to

⁵⁶Interview: C. M. Woodruff Jr., July 1974, Austin

⁵⁷Letter, George C. Hester to Colonel Walter J. Bell, March 17, 1958, Senate Case and Project 1958, Box 639, LBJ Library, Austin

whoever would listen — the President, a succession of senators, congressmen, and chiefs of the Army Corps of Engineers.

“With the waters from three rampaging rivers above Georgetown carrying 28% of the water coming from the highlands . . . [at] over 1,300 altitude . . . through Georgetown, 750, a great drop and is equal to twice the damage in its rampaging rush of three rivers,” he wrote in a special report to the Army Corps of Engineers. “. . . The combined North, Middle and South Gabriels starts the damage and should be stopped by dams above Georgetown. This deluge . . . adds to those stiller waters below on the more level lands . . . where . . . the waters keep adding to make a four mile stream.”⁵⁸ Sherrill noted that during the 1921 flood, the San Gabriel River ran twenty miles wide. That was the salesman talking, Sherrill’s typical bombast. And yet, there was some truth to his claim. In that flood, the San Gabriel essentially merged with its tributaries — Brushy Creek, Alligator Creek, Willis Creek, Pecan Branch, Mustang Creek, Bull Creek, Boggy Creek, Dry Brushy and Sore Finger among them — and transformed the eastern third of Williamson County into a watery graveyard. On one awful night, ninety people drowned there within a fan-shaped area roughly fifteen by twenty miles wide.

⁵⁸ Owen W. Sherrill, “A Supplemental Report to U.S. Army Engineers on Resurvey Dam Sites,” circa 1954, Box 59, BRA, Waco

PART I

THE RIVER

1

The Flood

Out in the Gulf of Mexico, below the United States's southern tip, a hurricane stirred. On Wednesday, September 7, 1921, U. S. Weather Service watchers at Brownsville, Texas, noted a "disturbance." As the storm rolled slowly inland, heading north across three hundred miles of frypan-flat coastal plain, it first seemed nothing more than a welcome autumn thunderstorm. Two and one-sixteenth inches of rain fell at Corpus Christi. But on Thursday, when the storm reached Texas' first line of hills at the Balcones Escarpment, something unusual happened: an

independent low-pressure system, parked over the Balcones Escarpment and stretching to the Pacific Ocean, sucked the gulf storm into its orb, magnifying and lengthening its life by days.⁵⁹

It rained and it rained and it rained. Lightning laced cobwebs of shimmering electricity across the sky. Thunder ripped the wet air. Central Texas was awash in flash floods: Austin eventually reported 18.23 inches of rain and San Marcos was “entirely under water,” but the storm did its worst in Williamson County. There, Friday dawned a ghastly pea green, but the rain did not stop. Instead, it drummed on. “It just kept raining harder and harder, all day long,” said Margaret Tegge Stearns, a young mother of three who lived by a cotton gin on the San Gabriel River at Circleville with her husband Auburn.⁶⁰

When it finally did stop raining — the *next* day — September 10, 1921, tiny Thrall had registered 38.21 inches of rain in twenty-four hours, a national record that was not broken for seventy years. Taylor recorded 23.11 inches during the same span.⁶¹ But rain or no rain, flooding streets or no, on

⁵⁹Interview: Margaret Tegge Stearns, June 1975, Taylor, Tex. Stearns was Clara Scarbrough’s mother and the author’s grandmother. Also see Taylor *Taylor Press*, “Greatest Rainfall in Twenty Years,” Sept. 10, 1921, 1

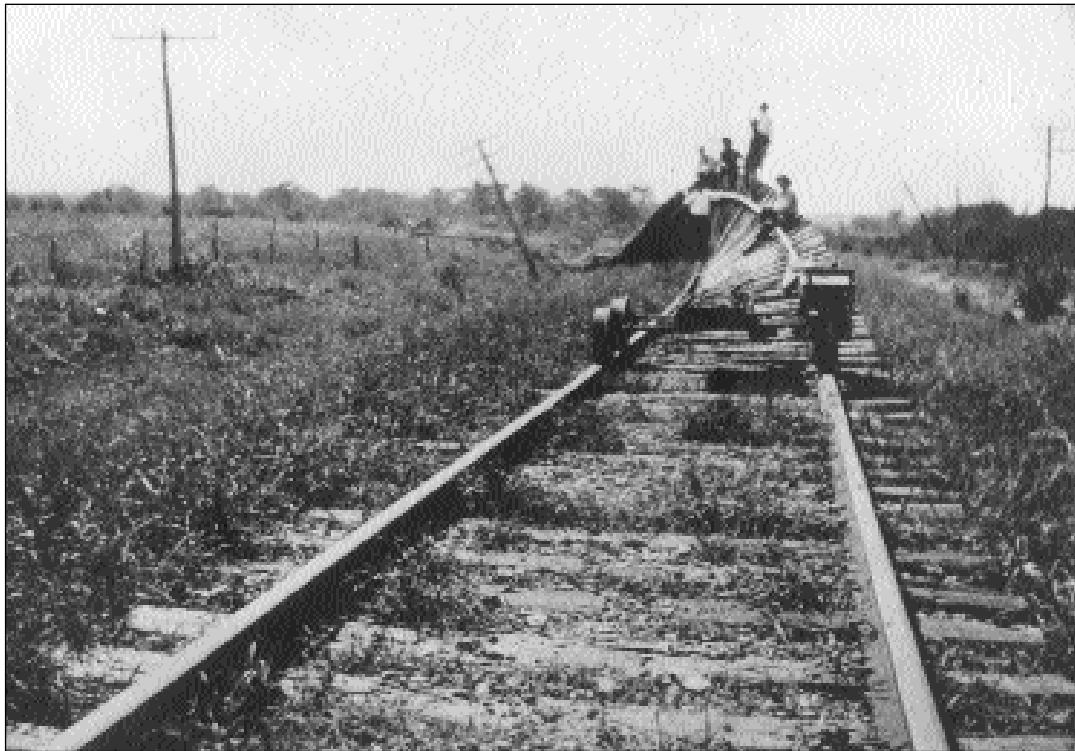
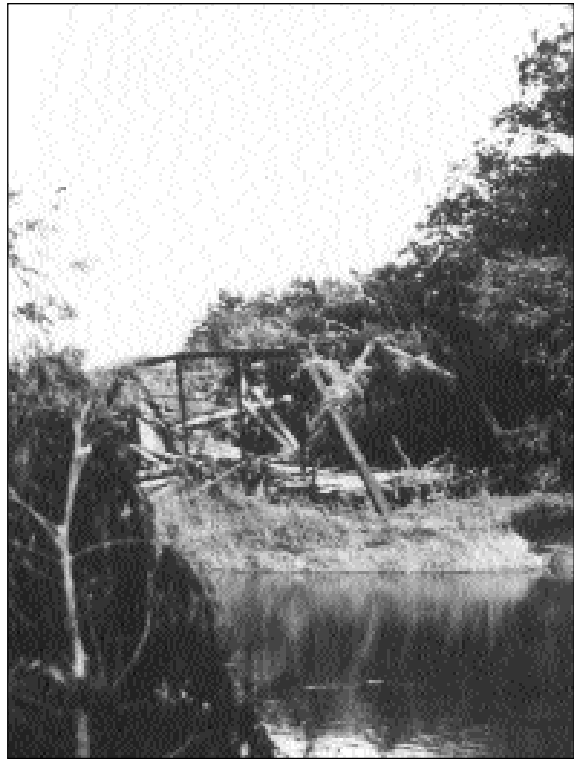
⁶⁰*San Antonio Express*, Sept. 11-16, 1921, 1; *Taylor Press*, “Record Flood Hits Taylor,” Sept. 10, 1921; 1; *Williamson County Sun*, “Unprecedented Rainfall Does Great Damage,” Sept. 16, 1921, 1; Clara Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 370-373

⁶¹Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 370-371



Figure 4: On September 10, 1921, the Taylor Daily Press bannered news of the flood. Note story on the Ku Klux Klan.

Figure 5-7: Auburn and “Peg” Stearns set out in a Model T in 1912, below. The iron trestle Circleville bridge, right, was swept three hundred yards downstream in the 1921 flood. Below, men pose on Katy rail line after it was peeled off the ground by the San Gabriel River’ rampage.



September 9, 1921, Taylor was focused on its prime purpose: getting the cotton crop picked, ginned and shipped. It was money in everybody's pockets. Scanning copies of the *Taylor Daily Press*, businessmen devoured the latest cotton prices: forty-five points up that week. Since harvest time was upon them, farm owners were vying for cotton pickers, mostly Mexican migrants, along with Afro-Americans who lived in Taylor and Granger. Thousands of "hands" — men with wives and small children — camped in tents or lived in shacks called "hand houses" along the San Gabriel's scenic banks, a short walk from the fields where they worked.⁶²

Taylor's social set adored Ruth Mantor, the fourteen-year-old daughter of attorney H.C. Mantor. Ruth had inherited her father's dry wit and brilliant mind. On Friday evening, Ruth drove through the storm to a friend's house for a slumber party. The girls had hoped some boys would drop by, but the boys never

⁶²Interview: Billye Fulcher Cannon, Jan. 28, 2000, Rockdale; *Taylor Press*, "Cotton sells at 16 cents in Taylor today," Aug. 29; Foley, *ibid.*, 1, 8, 10, 44-45, 80; Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 373-374; *Rockdale Reporter & Messenger*, "She Heard 23 Die," Jan. 22, 1998, 4; *Williamson County Sun*, Clara Scarbrough, "Glories, difficulties," Sept. 30, 1998, Williamson County Sesquicentennial Special Edition, 8; "Unprecedented Rainfall Does Great Damage," Sept. 16, 1921, 1; *San Antonio Express*, Sept. 13, 15, 16, 1921

materialized. Fifteen inches of rain had already fallen on Taylor since early that day, and the rain kept sheeting down, harder than ever. At about 9:30 p.m., the “electric globes” at Mantor’s friend’s

house flickered and died. Not long afterwards, the telephone went dead. Taylor was plunged into darkness. Nearly eighty years later, Ruth Mantor perfectly recalled the storm’s fury: “It didn’t sound like rain,” she said. “It was a roar. It sounded like fire hoses turned on.” Mustang Creek had spilled into Taylor’s streets, swamping the city’s electrical works. Donahoe, Willis, Possum, Turkey, Bull, Mustang, Boggy and Brushy creeks, and of course the San Gabriel were behaving similarly, expanding their girths until eastern Williamson County’s lowlands were transformed into a shallow sea, punctuated by peninsulas and islands. The floods snapped telephone poles and telegraph lines, leaving most of the county isolated and uninformed about what was happening elsewhere. It took three days to restore electrical power in Taylor.⁶³

Saturday dawned at Ruth Mantor’s party. “I had the family car, so when the water started running off the yards, I decided to drive out and take a look at Mustang Creek,” she said. “Normally, Mustang Creek is a little tiny rivulet you could have hopped over,

⁶³Interview: Ruth Mantor, Oct. 29, 1999, Taylor; *Taylor Press*, “Record Flood Hits Taylor,” Sept. 10, 1921, and “Light and Power Again Restored,” Sept. 13, 1921. The *Press* explained it printed its paper due to the heroics of a Texas Power and Light employee, who had hooked up a special power generator.

but that morning, it was a mile wide. It had washed out all the pavement on Highway 79 and had taken out the railroad bridge. Steel beams were twisted like horseshoes around trees. Shacks and houses floated by. I saw dead cows float by. The water was a funny sort of milk chocolate color.”⁶⁴

While Ruth Mantor and her friends watched flooding from the relative safety of Taylor, in Circleville the Stearns fled for their lives. All day Friday, gin-owner Auburn Stearns had been keeping a close watch on the San Gabriel, wading every hour through the knee-deep black clay goop from his house to the river’s bank. Every hour he returned, reassuring his wife Margaret, “Nothing to be scared about. That river’s running clear water.” That evening, though, he started on his trek to the river, but returned immediately. The river had swallowed its steep banks, crossed a road and was in the Stearns’ front yard.

“Peg, run! Get the children and get in the car. We’ve got to get out of here fast!” Auburn shouted. It was a narrow escape. “Just minutes more and we wouldn’t have made it,” Margaret Stearns said decades later. “Pop was driving an old Model T,

⁶⁴Mantor, *ibid.*, Don Scarbrough, “Passing Glance,” *Williamson County Sun*, Sept, 1991

which was built high off the road. The road was covered with water, two feet deep and rising fast. If we hadn't been in that Model T, we would have been gone for sure." The car stalled on the iron trestle bridge that crossed the San Gabriel, but Auburn Stearns got it restarted. "We had the honor of being the last to cross that old bridge," Margaret Stearns said. It was swept three hundred yards downstream later that night.⁶⁵

At Friendship, eleven-year-old Billye "Bill" Fulcher struggled to control her terror. She and her six brothers and sisters lived with their tenant farmer parents, who rented a three-story house about three-quarters of a mile north of the San Gabriel River. The house perched on a hill. On a clear day, from her upstairs window, "Bill" could see the big native pecan trees of the bottom land along the river. The trees sheltered a line of hand houses for farm workers. "That night," she said, "we heard a sound like a freight train. That was the wall of water coming down. Then we heard this loud wailing noise. I was scared to death. My daddy knew what was happening. 'It's somebody caught in the water,' he

⁶⁵Stearns, *ibid.*

said. ‘But there’s nothing anybody can do.’ It was voices — human voices. I’ll never, ever forget that sound, not as long as I live.”⁶⁶

Five Mexican families, most likely refugees from the civil wars which had plagued Mexico throughout the previous decade, and two other people, had fled their shacks on Jake Bowers’ plantation to take shelter in a large stone house on the river bank which locals called “The Big House.” Unfortunately, it could not shield them from the San Gabriel River, which that night rose more than forty feet — Billye Fulcher’s “wall of water.”⁶⁷ Inside, Pablo L. Quintanilla, a leader and clerk of the San Gabriel Mexican Presbyterian Church, Quintanilla’s wife and their five children; Mr. and Mrs. Antonio de la Torre and their three children; Mr. and Mrs. Nicanor Gonzales; Mrs. Maria G. de Mendez and her three children; and two other horrified people felt muddy water bubbling up through the floorboards over their feet. Within seconds, water lapped at their knees, then their waists. They scrambled to tabletops, lifted babies to rafters, punched through roof shingles and climbed to the roof where they clung, screaming for help. The river surged upward, an implacable monster. In all, twenty-three people died at The Big House. Eighteen of them were members of the San Gabriel Mexican Presbyterian Church.⁶⁸

⁶⁶*Rockdale Reporter*, “She Heard 23 Die,” Jan. 22, 1998, 4; Cannon, *ibid.*

⁶⁷Cannon, *ibid.*; *Taylor Press*, “Gabriel River Forty Feet Up Still Rising,” Sept. 10, 1921, 1; *Rockdale Reporter*, *ibid.*

⁶⁸*Taylor Press*, “Flood Victims on Bowers Farm,” Sept. 16, 1921, 1; Cannon, *ibid.*, *Rockdale Reporter*, *ibid.*; Austin Presbyterian Theological

The tragedy of the Quintanillas and their friends multiplied throughout Williamson and Milam counties. “Hundreds Perish,” a banner headline in the *Taylor Daily Press* shouted the next day. In a week, the final toll of Williamson County deaths was set at ninety-two. In Milam County, just across the county line, sixty-four perished. Many victims found there were thought to have drifted on the flood’s surging waters from Williamson County. Almost all of the victims were Mexican migrant workers, or Mexican-American and Afro-American field hands trapped where they had camped along the creeks and rivers, as was the practice during harvest in those days. What makes the loss especially poignant is how little was known about the victims — then or now. In a very real sense, the dark-skinned “hands” who died in Williamson County represented the “stoop labor” so easily available to Texas planters. When the laborers and their families were swept away, unknown and unnamed, others, just as nameless, showed up to take their jobs.⁶⁹

Seminary, whose records show the San Gabriel Mexican Presbyterian Church disappeared from church records after 1921. The first published report of the fate of the little church’s parishioners came in the *Press* from the noted evangelistic Presbyterian preacher, the Reverend Walter S. Scott. In describing events at “The Big House,” I have borrowed from many stories of survivors of the 1921 flood. At dozens of farms in Williamson County, families clung to their rooftops or held on in treetops for two, sometimes three, days until the waters receded. The Quintanillas and their friends were not so fortunate.

⁶⁹*Taylor Press*, “County Death Toll Reaches 92,” Sept. 15, 1921; “Thorndale Reports 61 Dead,” Sept. 16, 1921; *San Antonio Express*, “Brazos and Nueces Are Rising,” Sept. 15, 1921; “63 Bodies Are Found at Thorndale,” Sept. 16, 1921; Hester, *ibid.*, 7

Property damage was staggering. A few miles east of Georgetown, the Gabriel ripped a Katy iron trestle railroad bridge from its moorings and flipped a locomotive and rail cars as if they were children's toys. At Circleville, the river pried up railroad tracks, contorting them into roller-coasters. Every bridge and low-water crossing in Williamson County was swept away or damaged, along with the county's roads. Repairing them required going deeply into debt — something the county had never before contemplated. Officials estimated it would cost a million dollars to repair and replace public roads and bridges, not counting damage to private property. Farmers lost ten thousand square miles of precious top soil. Hardly any livestock survived. Hundreds of homes had floated downstream or were beyond repair. County government drafted all Williamson County males to the "Herculean task" of burying mangled corpses and reconstructing bridges and roads. The stench of death, many said, was worse than they had experienced as soldiers in the trenches during the Great War.⁷⁰

In the grim weeks after the flood, Williamson County fixed on one major remedy: dam the San Gabriel forks in the highlands above Georgetown so the river could never again spread death

⁷⁰*Williamson County Sun*, Sept. 16, 1921; Correspondence, Owen W. Sherrill to Brazos River Authority, 1921 flood photographs, undated, BRA, Box 59, Waco; *Austin Statesman*, "Repair of Flood Damage . . . Prompt in Williamson County," undated, circa Sept. 18, 1921, Center for American History, Williamson County Scrapbook; *Taylor Press*, Sept. 13, 1921; Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 371-376; Hester, *ibid.*, 5-8, 10-12

and destruction through the county's heartland. It was an expression of collective will, cutting across all segments of the population. Williamson County pursued that mission until it eventually collided with powerful state and federal forces. Because of its experience in the 1921 flood, and its subsequent efforts to tame the river, Williamson County blocked the will of national politicians, the Army Corps of Engineers and a regional watershed plan for thirty years. In the end, a compromise "solution" produced unexpected results. To a surprising extent, today's Williamson County is an outgrowth of the flood of 1921 — and of a local determination to correct the causes of that disaster.

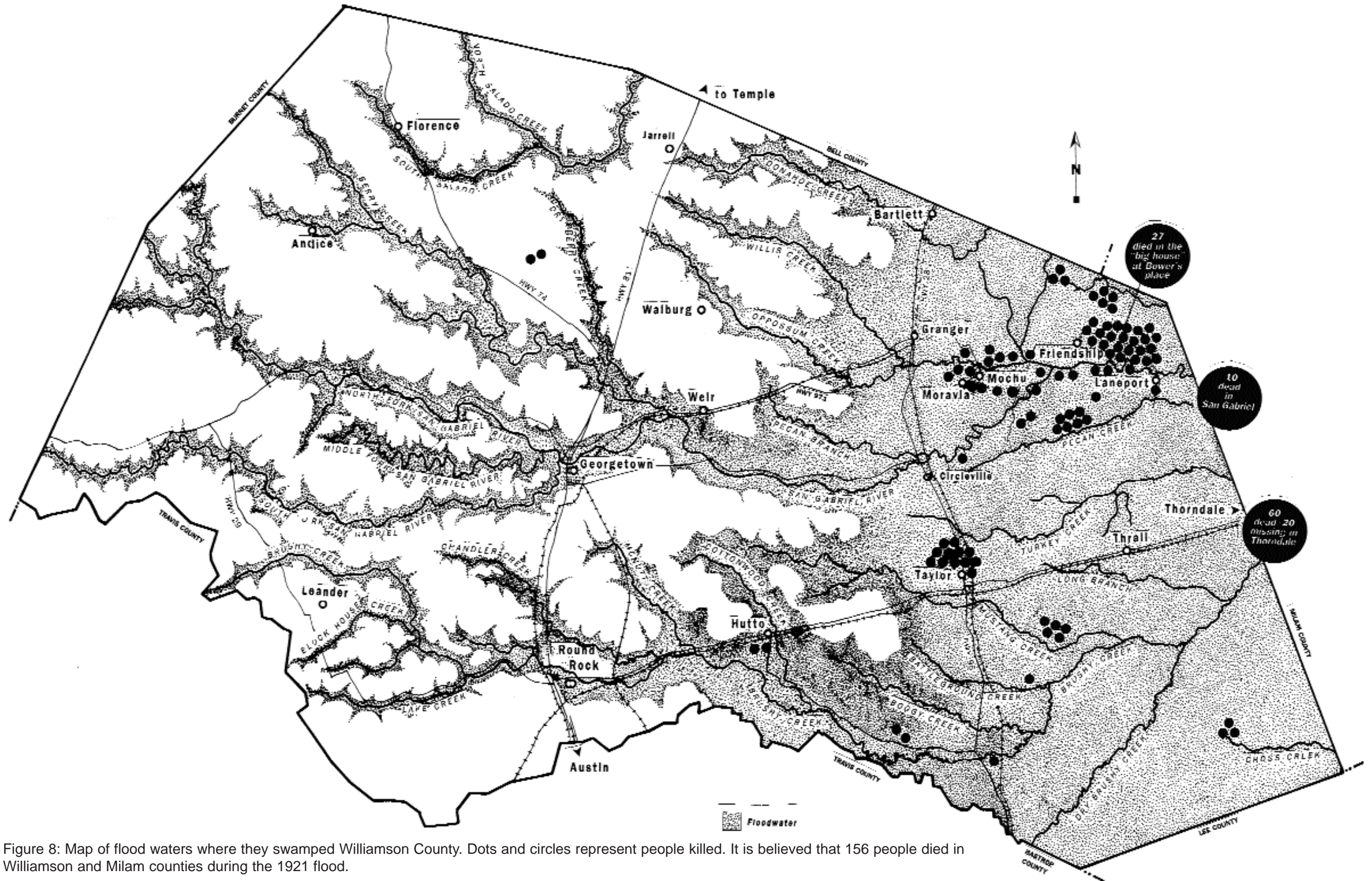


Figure 8: Map of flood waters where they swamped Williamson County. Dots and circles represent people killed. It is believed that 156 people died in Williamson and Milam counties during the 1921 flood.

Foundation and Devolution

One fine day not long after the 1921 flood, so the story goes, Georgetown newspaper editor John M. Sharpe took his childhood friend, Congressman James P. “Buck” Buchanan, on a carriage ride west of town.⁷¹ Sharpe wanted to break the San Gabriel River’s nasty habit of flooding, a habit violently displayed not only in 1921, but also in 1913, 1900 and 1893.⁷² The two men rode four miles west from the county seat through thick clumps of live oak, juniper and sumac until they reached a

⁷¹John M. Sharpe Papers, John M. Sharpe Jr., Georgetown, “Outstanding Citizens Get Awards at C-C Banquet,” *Williamson County Sun*, Feb. 16, 1961, Georgetown

⁷²Letter: Hester to Bell, *ibid.*

limestone cliff offering a postcard view of the San Gabriel's North Fork.

“Here,” Sharpe told Buchanan, “is a good place to build our dam.” The story may have been apocryphal, but it was still being repeated half a century later.⁷³ Over the years, Sharpe became a Georgetown patriarch — mayor, postmaster and confidant of powerful Texans — and in his mind the dam towered on the North Fork of the San Gabriel River, protecting the county seat and the fertile soil to the east that brought prosperity to industrious farm families and merchants catering to their needs.

In the early twentieth century, floods increasingly plagued Texas. Every few years, citizens of Fort Worth, Austin and San Antonio watched helplessly as usually lackluster rivers boiled up and destroyed man's hard-won works. As settlers thickened across the rich Black Waxy, floods brought burdensome social and economic costs to rural Texas. Between 1891 and 1932, the Brazos River and its tributaries, including the San Gabriel River, killed five hundred and forty-two people and destroyed property valued at fifty-four million dollars.⁷⁴ The Colorado and Trinity rivers were almost as unruly. A network of flood-control dams

⁷³Mark Mitchell, “Dam Story,” *The Sunday Sun*, Georgetown, Texas, Oct. 7, 1979. The anecdote came from Thatcher Atkin, a former Georgetown mayor.

⁷⁴*Facts . . .*, Brazos River Authority (1956), Mineral Wells, Texas, Senate 1956 Case and Project File, Brazos River Authority, Box 1210, LBJ Library

seemed the answer to a problem threatening to cripple the state's economic development.

In 1929, Texas legislators created the Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District, a pioneering watershed control effort aimed at stopping punishing floods that annually washed tons of precious fertile topsoil into the Gulf of Mexico. A coalition of rice farmers in the lower Brazos basin “took the lead” in shaping the district, it was said, but the idea enjoyed broad support.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the Brazos district had no money, nor did the Legislature provide any. It soon became clear that to accomplish its goal of controlling floods, the Brazos district, which was later renamed the Brazos River Authority, needed to build dams that could produce and sell hydro-electric power. But the Depression turned engineering blueprints and high hopes into pipe dreams.

While the Depression battered millions of lives, it produced President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a fervent believer in the federal government funding public works projects on a scale never before contemplated — especially dams, which might control floods, irrigate parched farms and provide water and power for growing cities. Until the Thirties, when the biggest high dams on the globe — Hoover, Shasta, Bonneville and Grand Coulee — were constructed, no significant concrete dam had ever

⁷⁵Oral history: William Robert “Bob” Poage, Baylor University, Waco (1985), Poage Papers, Vol. 1, 336

been built in the United States. But when these four colossi reared over the Colorado and Columbia rivers, a new pattern of dam building was established. Americans listened to Woodie Guthrie's song on the radio:

That big Grand Coulee 'n Bonneville dam'll
build a thousand factories f'r Uncle Sam . . .

Don't like dictators none much myself,
What I think is the whole world oughta be run by
E-electricity . . .

Their political representatives all over the country clamoured for dams — hydropower, if possible.⁷⁶

Texas' first hydropower dams were not built on the Brazos but on the Colorado River by a fledgling river authority which became the Lower Colorado River Authority. As Brazos watershed boosters gnashed their teeth in envy, the LCRA built two hydroelectric dams: Buchanan (1935-37) and Marshall Ford (1936-40), renamed for Austin Mayor Tom Miller upon completion. The always entrepreneurial LCRA quickly became a powerful utility company. The Colorado authority also constructed Inks (1936-38) and Mansfield (1937-41) dams, creating a water sportsman's paradise and land developer's dream in the poor chalky hills west of Austin.⁷⁷ The LCRA got these dams through the muscle of three powerful Texas

⁷⁶Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert* Penguin Books, New York (1986), 158-161

⁷⁷*State of the River 1993*, Lower Colorado River Authority, 12-13

congressmen: James “Buck” Buchanan, John Sharpe’s old friend who chaired the powerful House Appropriations Committee; Joseph Jefferson Mansfield, chairman of the Rivers and Harbors Committee, which controlled dam projects throughout the United States; and, after Buchanan’s death, Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas’ Tenth District. Eleven days after his 1937 election to Congress, Johnson saved LCRA’s Marshall Ford Dam (and its contractors, Brown and Root Inc., which built its first bridge across the San Gabriel River after the 1921 flood) from certain bankruptcy.⁷⁸ While the Brazos River Authority found an effective champion in Congressman W.R. “Bob” Poage, the Waco attorney’s fastidious, legalistic approach never could match Johnson’s peerless ability to circumvent intractable problems, especially during the desperate early years of the state’s watershed districts.⁷⁹

For Williamson County, Sharpe’s old dream of damming the San Gabriel moved toward wakeful reality on September 26, 1935, when President Roosevelt signed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which gave planning funds to thirteen Brazos watershed dams and other projects across the United States. Two were to be built on the San Gabriel’s North and South Forks — the North Fork dam precisely where John Sharpe had told

⁷⁸Robert A. Caro, *Path to Power*, Vintage Books, New York (1983), 373, 379-385, 459-462. Herman and George Brown, who owned Brown and Root, were to become powerhouses in Texas politics, and Lyndon Johnson’s most important financial supporters.

⁷⁹Oral history: Poage, Nov. 11, 1968, 9-11, LBJ Library

Congressman Buchanan it should be built.⁸⁰ Newspapers bannered the story, “\$30,500,000 Brazos River Project Becomes rejoiced.⁸¹ But twelve months later, the Brazos plan had stalled, mired in a fracas over its board of directors’ decision to sell hydroelectric power from Possum Kingdom Dam to a private utility company.⁸² Finally, between 1938 and 1941, the Brazos district built Possum Kingdom Dam, which produced hydropower and helped coastal rice farmers get water when they needed it. But after Possum Kingdom, no more dams were built in the Brazos Valley until after World War II.⁸³

In the summer of 1945, the federal government gave the Brazos River Authority \$75,000 to plan the dam system Roosevelt had authorized ten years earlier. The original thirteen-dam plan had been whittled to eight reservoirs, but the San Gabriel’s North Fork and South Fork dams remained on the to-do list.⁸⁴ The Army Corps of Engineers and the nation’s other great dam-building agency, the Bureau of Reclamation, carried out independent

⁸⁰Memo: Franklin D. Roosevelt to Secretary of the Treasury, Sept. 26, 1935, Box 6, H.S. Hilburn, Brazos River Authority, Waco

⁸¹*Temple Daily Telegram*, Sept. 27, 1935, 1

⁸²Telegram: Maury Maverick to Poage, Dec. 8, 1936; letter, Maverick to Poage Dec. 11, 1936; letter, Poage to Maverick, Dec. 17, 1936; Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., *Waters of the Brazos*, Texian Press, Waco (1981) 28-31

⁸³Morris Sheppard Dam, commonly called Possum Kingdom, was the key to the Brazos River Valley’s master plan — both the BRA’s proudest accomplishment and arguably, its most flawed. But without it, there was no “system” and no money. See Hendrickson, *ibid.*, chapters V, VIII

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, Hendrickson, 52

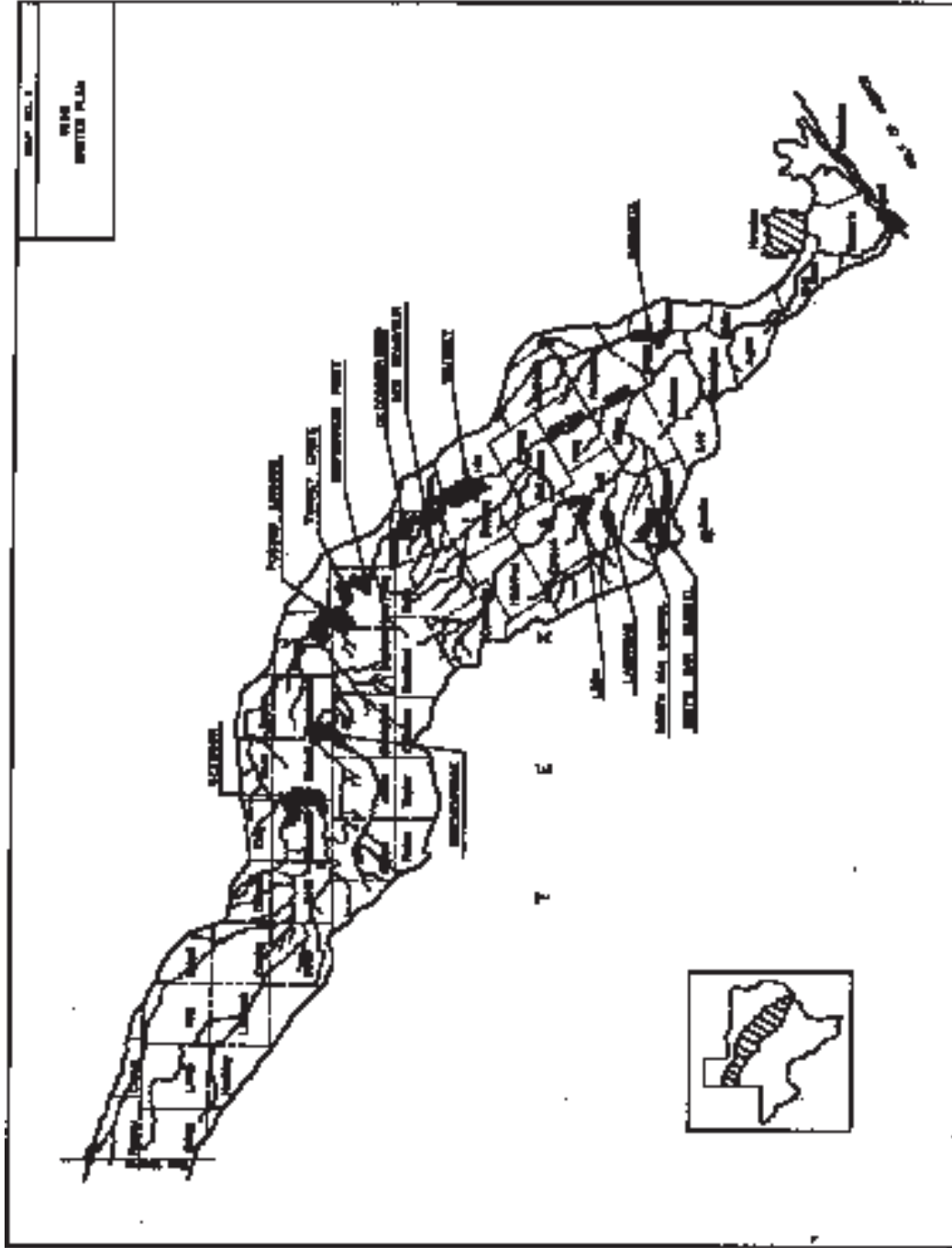


Figure 9: The Brazos River Authority's 1935 master plan for dams, including the North and South San Gabriel, but no dam at Laneport.

studies. In Williamson County, there was a sense of inevitability about the San Gabriel dams. Sooner or later, people thought, they would get built. When the next big flood came, the county would be spared. Unfortunately, they were wrong.

The old consensus to curb the river at its upper, or western, forks was unraveling on three fronts: bureaucratic, political and financial. In Williamson County, few suspected what was happening. Perhaps the most significant unraveling occurred on February 5, 1946, at an Austin meeting that remained unknown to the public. Officials from the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, America's two great competitive dam-building agencies, squared off to see who would win the Brazos watershed contracts with its multitude of dams. Both sets of engineers had done cursory surveys. The Bureau of Reclamation was keen to hold the San Gabriel's flow above Georgetown, on the river's western forks, releasing floodwaters to irrigate the intensely cultivated land downstream, allowing Black Waxy farmers to develop an agricultural power center. It was a pattern the Bureau had successfully pursued in California, though the California result favored huge farm corporations rather than small family farms such as those in Williamson County. But the

theoretical plusses and minuses of the irrigation plan were never debated by the people it would have affected because no one in Williamson County ever knew about the Bureau's scheme.

The Army's engineers, whose mission was flood control, not irrigation, found "no justification" whatsoever for dam sites on the river's forks west of Georgetown. Instead, the Army called for a dam at a tiny river crossing called Laneport in the far eastern reaches of Williamson County — smack in the middle of the Black Waxy and hundreds of extremely productive small farms. In fact, the Army's dam would be built just four miles from Williamson's boundary with Milam County, due east of Williamson. The Army's dam would create a large, shallow lake covering as many as two hundred of the county's thousand-plus Blackland Prairie farms — Texas's most productive non-irrigated farm zone.⁸⁵ It was as if a government agency devoted to protecting the nation's oil deposits decided to destroy its most productive oil field, on the theory that other oil fields might be developed through that destruction. But the Army engineers did not really care about farming; they were interested in flood control. They argued that if the point of the Brazos master plan was flood control, as indeed its 1935 enabling act (and subsequent modifications) had specified, a dam at Laneport would control flooding downstream in the Brazos basin more cost-efficiently than dams on the San

⁸⁵Bridgette Cavanaugh, "Granger Dam," a 1973 report in which Cavanaugh cites a Texas A&M study that reached this conclusion.

Gabriel's North and South Forks. That was probably true, since most of the San Gabriel's tributaries flowed into the main stem below the proposed "fork" dams, but it was not true within Williamson County, where for decades the Brazos River Authority had supported flood control dams on the North and South Fork of the San Gabriel to protect the farmers of the Black Waxey.

The Corps' position nettled the Reclamation Bureau representative, who protested that damming Laneport would permanently flood twenty thousand acres of prime agricultural land which the Bureau of Reclamation was prepared to irrigate. Well, countered the Army, there were ten thousand acres of arable land "suitable for irrigation" *below* the Laneport dam site in Milam County. Why didn't the Bureau do something with that?

So the agencies cut a deal. If the Army would agree to make Laneport dam bigger than originally contemplated so it could be used to control floods *and* irrigate, the Bureau would irrigate Milam County's farms and "abandon its potential North and South San Gabriel projects in favor of the Army's Lanesport [sic] project."⁸⁶ Two months later, the Bureau dropped out of the picture. Presumably it had bigger fish to fry. For all practical purposes, the Army controlled the Brazos basin. For Williamson County's farm life, both economic and social, this decision was to

⁸⁶Conference: Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Feb. 5, 1946, Austin, Tx., RG 77 Records of the Corps of Engineers Ft. Worth District, Civil Works Project Files, 1934-1961, Brazos River, 001-675 Box 36

prove as disastrous — and as out of the county’s control — as the 1921 flood itself.⁸⁷

Despite brave talk about the superiority of the Laneport dam site over the upper fork dam sites, the Army engineers appear to have been at odds with themselves. A letter dated May 12, 1948 — six months before the Army formally recommended Laneport — reveals disagreement high within the ranks. Colonel Henry Hutchings Jr., chief of the Army’s Southwestern Division in Fort Worth, wrote Congressman Lyndon Johnson a terse explanation of why a final report on the San Gabriel River was being delayed. “It was found,” Colonel Hutchings wrote, “that we differed in some essentials from the opinions expressed by the District Engineer [in Galveston], and it was deemed best to reconcile all those differences prior to submission of my own recommendation.”⁸⁸ Hutchings did not spell out the details of these “essentials,” but clearly they concerned the contest over where the San Gabriel River should best be checked.

The Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District was struggling with its own internal conflicts. Its manager, R.D. Collins, sympathized with Georgetown and the old plan to dam the San Gabriel’s western forks. John Sharpe and F.D. Love of Georgetown were old friends, former directors of the Brazos

⁸⁷Letter, L.W. Smith to Col. D.W. Griffiths, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, April 5, 1946, *ibid.*

⁸⁸Letter, Henry Hutchings, Jr. to Lyndon B. Johnson, May 12, 1948, Box 36, Army Corps of Engineers, National Archives, Ft. Worth, Texas

district's board. The Brazos District's Dallas attorney John McCall actively supported Georgetown's cause. On the other side, Congressman W.R. "Bob" Poage, who had legislated the tools for the Brazos District to develop the Brazos River Valley, staunchly supported a Laneport dam, since Milam County lay below Laneport and was a part of Poage's Eleventh Congressional District. And Collins' promising new director, John Howard Fox of Hearne, who had replaced his deceased father, Granger's John Short Fox, leaned toward Laneport because his brother Wilson Fox was lobbying for it so industriously. (On the other hand, Howard Fox's *other* two brothers, Henry and Bryan, opposed Laneport, so Howard was torn.)

The big issue for the Brazos Water District regarding Laneport was whether its officials would embrace the Army's regional planning scheme for the Brazos basin. If they did, they were almost forced to support Laneport. In theory, they did. But Collins and his board came from the old school of dam planning, in which dams were erected to meet particular local needs. And they could not help empathizing with people they knew and respected, like those in Granger and Georgetown who decried the Laneport plan. When local interests conflicted with those of the entire watershed, as Williamson County's so patently did, the Brazos directors' confusion and pain became acute.

Before the Army Corps of Engineers elbowed the Bureau of Reclamation away from the San Gabriel and determined to dam the river at Laneport, a whiz-bang Washington D.C. commodities trader thought he smelled gold near the Black Waxy tenant farm where he grew up. On January 31, 1946 — five days *before* Corps and Bureau officials smoked the peace pipe in Austin and two years before the Army plan was revealed to the public — Ralph W. Moore paid nine thousand dollars for just under two hundred acres of San Gabriel River bottom land. It lay close to his birthplace at Friendship and to the site of The Big House where the Quintanilla family lost their lives in 1921.

Moore's purchase was the second sign of trouble for the original plan to dam the San Gabriel where most people in Williamson County believed it should be dammed, on its western forks. Moore's land purchase quickly became fodder for gossip. Nearly everybody in Williamson County knew Moore — a big round man with a moon-shaped face who nearly always sported a white Stetsen and an impeccable white suit. Moore's charm had taken him from his father's tenant farm to the top of the Texas Grange, where he had befriended politicians and farm promoters across the nation. In 1940 Moore and his wife, Lois, had moved to

Washington, where he got rich trading farm futures on the commodities market. He loved telling old cronies in Granger, Taylor and Friendship about hobnobbing on Capitol Hill with “Senator This” or “Senator That.” It didn’t make sense to the folks back home that Ralph Moore would give up the “high life” to become a gentleman farmer.⁸⁹

“Oh, he was something,” chuckled former Congressman J.J. “Jake” Pickle when asked about Moore. “He made truckloads of money and lost it, several times. He loved to gamble. Not at the roulette table, you understand, but he took big risks. . . . He was always in the middle of water projects . . . He was close to the water authorities, maybe close with Poage.”⁹⁰ (After a decade in Congress, “Bob” Poage, the Waco congressman who represented Bell and Milam counties, just to the north and east of Laneport, was chairing the House Agricultural Committee. He was a great booster of dams.)

On February 22, 1946, Moore bought another hundred and thirty-four acres adjoining the farm he had acquired a few weeks earlier, paying two thousand dollars cash and agreeing to pay off a \$5,700 lein on the property. That was just the start. Between January 31, 1946, and June 24, 1948 — his final purchase coming five months *before* the Army made public its plan to dam the Gabriel at Laneport — Ralph W. Moore assembled fifteen farm

⁸⁹Interview: Opal Wilks, Nov. 6-7, 2000, Taylor

⁹⁰Interview: J.J. “Jake” Pickle, April 18, 2000, Austin

tracts containing two thousand, four hundred and seventy-two acres around his native Friendship, hard by a lake that had not yet been officially announced, much less sanctioned or built. The deeds of sale committed Moore and his wife to pay two hundred thousand dollars for the land — a fortune in 1948.⁹¹

No one can say for certain why Ralph Moore pledged to spend two hundred thousand dollars on agricultural land when farm values were sinking. If he shared his ideas with anybody, the records have long since slipped beyond reach. There is a theory, of course. People back home thought Ralph Moore was trying to make a killing. He wanted to develop a lake-side development. If the government condemned some of his land for the dam, he would sell at market valuation. If not, he would own lake-front property. About half of the owners from whom he bought land lived outside Williamson County; some would have had no idea of a rumored lake.⁹² But, the thinking goes, Ralph Moore would have known — *must* have known — that Laneport was a “done deal” to have sunk two hundred thousand dollars on all that land. His speculations had a rank smell to the nostrils of Williamson County residents, a hardy lot long conditioned to the farm odors

⁹¹Deed Records: County Clerk’s Office, Williamson County, Georgetown, Tx., 1946-1948. There were thirteen deeds; two of which involved two separate tracts. Land prices fluctuated wildly from \$3,832 for 308 acres (\$12.44 an acre) to \$67,115 for 430 acres (\$156 an acre). The average price per acre paid was \$80. Most, if not all, the land owners lived away from their land; seven of the thirteen lived outside Williamson County. In several land deals, the Moores assumed responsibility for outstanding liens.

⁹²Interview: Loretta Mikelancek, July, 1998, Granger

of dirt and manure. Political “bossism” was a given. “They talk about Duval County,” J.J. “Jake” Pickle said. “The little old city of Granger used to give [Lyndon Johnson] a vote of about forty or fifty to one. I’ve often wondered why they didn’t investigate Granger instead of just Duval County, because the votes there were just as heavy.”⁹³

It is unlikely anyone will ever know whether Moore gambled to build a real estate bonanza because someone “in the know” tipped him about Laneport dam, or whether he acted on instinct. It was common knowledge that a dam would be going in *somewhere*, but almost everyone expected it to be west of Georgetown. But Moore’s land acquisition program, preceeding (as it did) public knowledge of the dam’s location, fueled feelings of anger and betrayal about Laneport that helped opponents derail it for years, and nearly for good.

Suspicious about supposed “fat cat” deals that had somehow created Laneport dam rankled Williamson County’s patriotic World War II vets, high-ranking county officials, Chamber of Commerce “boosters,” and Czech-American farmers eager to prove themselves “good” Americans — people who might otherwise have “gone along” with the project, as Williamson County Democratic Party kingpin Wilson Fox kept assuring his friends in Washington they would. It didn’t help Laneport’s popularity that Fox was Moore’s attorney, that the two spoke

⁹³Oral History: Pickle, II-25, June 17, 1970, LBJ Library

frequently on the telephone and that Fox himself had personal financial reasons for pushing Laneport dam with policy makers.⁹⁴

Williamson County *Sun* editor Sharpe warned Senator Johnson about rumors of a dam being built at Laneport, rather than west of Georgetown. “I could be mistaken,” Sharpe wrote, “but I think I see the hand of the celebrated Ralph Moore in this, he having been reported to have purchased considerable farming land in that area. At any rate I think the matter needs some quiet investigation.”⁹⁵

Georgetown farm and ranch realtor Owen W. Sherrill sent a similar missive to Johnson. “Why a Laneport location could even be considered . . . unless, confidentially, the purchase of lands by people, now in Washington, around the Circleville area and near the San Gabriel, which could be condemned at very high prices, would seem possibly to have some bearing (we hope this is in error.)”⁹⁶

⁹⁴Interview: Gene Fondren, Sept. 1, 2000, Austin. Wilson Fox, along with the other five surviving Fox children, had inherited land along the San Gabriel from their father. There was a catch: the land could not be sold except through condemnation. Throughout the controversy, rumor had it that Wilson Fox wanted to sell his land because he needed money and therefore favored Laneport because it was the only way he could sell his land. His son, Dr. James Fox of Austin, strongly rejects that theory. Wilson’s need for money was probably no less acute than that of his two brothers, Bryan and Henry, each of whom stoutly opposed Laneport.

⁹⁵Letter, John Sharpe to Lyndon B. Johnson, Nov. 28, 1947, House Collection 1937-49, Box 314, LBJ Library

⁹⁶Letter, Owen W. Sherrill to Johnson, May 25, 1948, House Collection 1937-49, Rivers, San Gabriel Dam Project 1947-48, Box 314, LBJ Library

There was no error. But despite his involvement in a suspected “insider” deal, Moore made no fortune at Lanepoint. Most of the land he bought ended up in the possession of a Granger bank.⁹⁷ But he was, as Congressman Pickle put it, a “wheeler-dealer” — and he loved the concept of a lakeside development. Long after he gambled on land near Friendship, Moore purchased a fox-hunting estate in Virginia, dredged three large ponds on it, designed a subdivision so that many of its homes backed up to the water, and named it Warrenton Lakes Estates. That was in the early 1960’s. Today, Warrenton real estate agents say it is one of the best places to live in Fauquier County.⁹⁸ In 1971, blind and lame from diabetes, Moore died of a heart attack. Seven years later, the lake he had staked — and lost — a fortune on buried his childhood home.⁹⁹

The final unraveling of the “fork” dam plans occurred on the Potomac River when Lyndon Johnson, a magnetic force in the House of Representatives and brilliant at “delivering the goods” to constituents back home, decided in early May 1948 to run for the U.S. Senate. It was Williamson County’s misfortune that

⁹⁷Interview: Truett Beard, April 13, 2000, Granger

⁹⁸Interview: Betty Allen, Nov. 28, 2000, Warrenton; Wilks, *ibid.*

⁹⁹Obituary: *Fauquier Times Democrat*, undated, Moore Papers, *ibid.*

Johnson was tied up in a race for his political life that summer, before the Army's position on Laneport had completely jelled. After winning the Democratic primary on August 28 and facing only token opposition in November, Johnson turned away from his old Tenth Congressional District, concentrating on state matters. Before the November election, however, he did pledge — three times on paper — to help Georgetown secure dams on the forks of the western San Gabriel River.

“By now you will have received my letter of the 15th telling you of my deep and abiding interest in . . . the proposed San Gabriel projects near Georgetown. Permit me to say again that if one man can do the job, the Georgetown proposals will be approved at an early date,” he wrote realtor Sherrill.¹⁰⁰ But on that same day, Johnson wrote one of his most trusted advisors, Taylor attorney Harris A. Melasky, a tepid letter of support for the Laneport proposition.¹⁰¹ Johnson could see a collision looming, and he left it to his House of Representatives successor, his intimate friend, Homer Thornberry. Had Johnson been focusing on his district, rather than on the state, he could have changed the outcome. The dams on the San Gabriel's forks could have been built and the dam at Laneport dropped. Or all three proposed dams might have been built. Johnson deeply believed in

¹⁰⁰Letter: Johnson to Sherrill, Nov. 16, 1948, House File, Box 314, LBJ Library

¹⁰¹Letter: Johnson to Harris A. Melasky, Nov. 16, 1948, House File, Box 314, LBJ Library

dams, and there was no one better at working the pork barrel than Lyndon Johnson. Still, no one knows what he would have done.

Poage believed Johnson would have backed Laneport over the Georgetown dams. Years later Poage recollected,

We did have a matter that we worked out while [Johnson] was still a Congressman . . . We got the agreement on the dams on the San Gabriel just about the time that he made the race for the Senate . . . Mr. Johnson and I . . . came to an agreement that we would support any dams that the Army Engineers approved, and we would support their construction in the order in which the engineers recommended they be constructed. And he always stayed with it . . . But in all those years, we haven't built anything down there. It has always seemed to me to be clearly the result of the local people not being able to agree to accept that kind of agreement that Lyndon and I made twenty years ago¹⁰²

Had all this been known at the start of the conflict — the bureaucratic clashes over whether to irrigate or flood the San Gabriel Valley; whether it was worthier to control flooding in Williamson County or downstream in Milam County; Ralph Moore's land speculations and their murky origins; Congressman Johnson's suddenly reordered political universe and Congressman Poage's need to secure dams across the Brazos basin — would the story have played out differently? Would

¹⁰²Oral history: Poage, Nov. 11, 1968, LBJ Library

Friendship and Granger still be agricultural strongholds supporting a healthy Czech-American culture? Could irrigation have transformed the Black Waxy from a sustainable economy based on row cropping into a highly profitable agricultural paradise? Possibly. Had Williamson County forces understood the currents flowing underneath the public debate about Laneport, North and South Fork dams, Laneport's opponents would have been armed with some heavy artillery. As it was, they conducted an impressive war of attrition. And they almost won.

3

The Fix

They remembered the 1921 flood too well. Williamson County's leading lights — Chamber of Commerce and city officials, county commissioners, farmers, gin owners, farm supply dealers, ranchers, real estate brokers, bankers, cottonseed oil producers and newspapermen — gathered at Taylor's City Hall at seven o'clock on November 23, 1948, to hear news they expected would alter their lives. Many had served in World War II. Now they were home, intent on grasping a piece of America's new post-war prosperity.

Most believed they would hear confirmation of the old plan to master the flood-prone San Gabriel River by building a pair of dams on its two forks west of Georgetown. Such a plan had been approved since 1935, at least in a sketchy stage, by the Brazos River Authority, the State of Texas and Congress. In the spring of 1946, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers had surveyed the San Gabriel, as part of a commission to control the floodwaters of the Brazos River watershed. Unexpectedly, the Army engineers had spent most of their time in the eastern end of the county, where the San Gabriel collects several streams as it lumbers across the broad Black Waxy plain. Exciting tales and distressing rumors had followed in the Army's wake; tonight the county would know precisely where the long-awaited dam, or dams, would land. But the county's movers and shakers believed it would serve the county well, stopping or at least diminishing serious floods and storing flood waters for use against drought years. A county publisher expressed the common perception:

Everybody always assumed that if there ever was a dam, it would be in the western end of the county, near the headwaters of the San Gabriel, to protect the rest of the county from flooding. The east end of the county was that rich, wonderful farm land. No one ever imagined putting a dam there.¹⁰³

¹⁰³Interview: Donald Lee Scarbrough, May, 1975, Georgetown

As sometimes happens, the dream turned nightmarish. One witness remembered the scene:

All the farmers were there, and of course the Corps with its snazzy charts and graphs. Well, once those farmers realized that the Corps' plan was to stick a twenty thousand acre lake in the middle of their best farm land, and further, that the dam wouldn't even protect them from flooding, just people *below* Williamson County, there was this terrible, dead silence. Then most of the farmers just got up and left.¹⁰⁴

Accounts of the two-hour session contradict each other, though they may simply have reflected different pieces of the same story. Newspaper reports highlighted the Army's plan, not the crowd's reaction to it. No official record was kept.¹⁰⁵ "Mostly the farmers just yelled," one observer recalled. "They were unanimously against it, and they expressed themselves vociferously."¹⁰⁶ Whether the farmers protested by walking out or shouting or both, they were plainly appalled.

Just as upset, a group Georgetown elites, businessmen and politicians, insisted that the Army reconsider its recommendation to build one dam at Laneport, near the eastern end of Williamson County. Owen Sherrill spoke for Georgetown. Sherrill sold real

¹⁰⁴Interview: Henry Fox, May, 1975, Circleville

¹⁰⁵Col. B. L. Robinson to Col. Henry Hutchings, Jr., Jan. 13, 1949, Records of the Army Corps of Engineers Fort Worth District, Civil Works Project Files, 1934-61, Brazos River 001-675 Box 36 E12, National Archives, Fort Worth

¹⁰⁶Donald Lee Scarbrough, *ibid.*

estate, specializing in ranches and farms, but he was also a 1910 graduate of Texas A&M, Williamson County's first county agent and an early advocate of "scientific" farming. The thought of that perfect black soil, buried under a huge lake, repulsed him. He hammered away at one point: dams must be built above Georgetown to save the county from "rampaging" floods.¹⁰⁷ Sherrill's persistence caused Colonel Henry R. "Hank" Norman, chief of the Corps' Galveston Engineering Division, to grudgingly admit that the county "might be protected to a greater extent from flash floods by the construction of the upper dams."¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, Sherrill's delegation diplomatically avoided opposing the Laneport dam — so long as the upper dams were built first. Congressman-elect Homer Thornberry, voted in three weeks earlier, squirmed in his seat, trying to decipher the situation. His friend and mentor, Lyndon B. Johnson, did not attend, having just won a seat in the U.S. Senate. Thornberry was taking over Johnson's old Tenth Congressional District seat. It would be a hard act to follow.

"There's the man to see," Colonel Norman told the Georgetown crowd, pointing to Thornberry. "A loud howl from you folks back here will help get the reservoir in the next appropriation bill."¹⁰⁹ Colonel Norman was playing to the patently

¹⁰⁷*Taylor Times*, Nov. 25, 1948; *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 26, 1948

¹⁰⁸*Taylor Times*, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹Norman was chief of the Engineering Division of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers' Galveston District. *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 26, 1948

obvious desire of the Georgetown contingent for dams on the north and south forks of the San Gabriel, not to the farmers' anguish about a Laneport dam burying their farms. In 1948, it was beyond belief that any group of farmers could stop a dam project, particularly one the federal government was financing. After all, the point of flood control dams, at least in theory, was to serve rural interests. Army engineers expected opposition from anyone whose home lay in the path of a dam project, but those objections were shrugged off. They were part of the price of doing business. The land was being purchased, and it was just too bad if the local tax appraiser routinely undervalued agricultural land. The Corps' backers in Congress generally took the same tack, sorrowfully commiserating with people who were losing their land, but pointing out the benefits for the "greater good." It was also beyond belief that any rational group of people would oppose *any* dam — particularly in Texas, beset by the flood-drought syndrome: extreme rains and flash floods one year, extreme aridity the next. Indeed, the assumption was exactly the opposite — that "local interests" would turn handsprings to be on the receiving end of a dam, any dam.

So the ram-rod erect Colonel Norman must have been somewhat startled at the crowd's hostility, but not worried.¹¹⁰ He expected dissent. After all, when the Laneport dam was finished, up to two hundred farms would be flooded; that many families

¹¹⁰*Sun*, *ibid.*

would have to give up their homes. The village of Friendship would end up underwater, along with a couple of smaller hamlets and four cemeteries. But that was part of the bargain with these federal projects — it was what everyone expected. With grave politeness, Colonel Norman fielded the farmers' questions, but he focused most of his attention on the Georgetown group, which seemed more threatening.

From the beginning, the Army brass thought they were seeing a case of pure selfishness in Georgetown's desire for a dam. To a degree, they were right, but they missed the larger, more accurate picture. From the moment Colonel Norman announced a dam would be built at Laneport, no Williamson County outsider adequately calibrated the overwhelming feeling ricocheting around the room — that a Laneport dam spelled disaster for the county. They missed it completely. Hardened by battlefield experience and flushed with engineering expertise, proud of their regional plan, first the Army engineers, then the politicians, misread or discounted that clear signal. In the end, that failure cost everyone with a stake in the waters of the Brazos: Williamson and Milam counties; hundreds of farm families who were forced off their land, taking a rich vein of Blackland Prairie economy with them; the Czech communities of Friendship, Granger and Taylor; the Brazos River Authority; Congressmen Thornberry and Poage; and Ralph Moore, who bet on Laneport before the game started.

On November 23, 1948, Colonel Norman's engineering lecture turned, perhaps inevitably, to the politics of dams. First he offered Congressman Thornberry up to the crowd, advising them to "howl." Later that evening, a Texas state water board official, Colonel Eugene Spence, echoed Norman's point:

If you people from Georgetown want those two dams bad enough, go to Congress and they'll tell the engineers to build those dams. That's what Belton did, and look what they got.¹¹¹

"They" got Belton Dam — and everybody in the room knew it. In Texas especially, dams were highly political creatures. There was nobody at Taylor City Hall that night unfamiliar with the fact that Senator-elect Lyndon Johnson, who had represented them in Congress for nine years, had inveigled President Roosevelt into completing Marshall Ford Dam, which otherwise would have fallen into bankruptcy, bringing disaster to the fledgling LCRA and ruining its contractors, Brown and Root of Houston, one of Johnson's ardent and (after his help) wealthiest supporters.¹¹² He bragged about it all the time, and Austin was grateful. So the colonels' advice to use politics to get a dam, though it came from a government civil engineer, did not sound strange to the ears in

¹¹¹Colonel Eugene Spence of the Texas Board of Water Engineers, quoted in the Nov. 26, 1948, *Williamson County Sun*. Belton Dam was built before a dam at Waco, which logic and need would have suggested be constructed first.

¹¹²Robert Caro, *The Path to Power*, Vintage (1983), New York, 459-468; Oral History: Sam Gideon, Oct. 3, 1968, LBJ Library, Austin

that room. The ears, after all, belonged to staunch “yellow-dog” Democrats whose county Democratic “machine,” run by Ralph Moore’s friend Wilson Fox, had faithfully backed Lyndon Johnson and Congressman-elect Thornberry and could be counted on to do so again if the voters were kept happy.

The men at Taylor City Hall listened carefully to the colonels’ advice. Then they relentlessly followed it for two dozen years. They took it in directions unimagined by the colonels, sustaining a brilliant political and public relations campaign to overthrow the proposed Laneport dam and substitute two dams on the upper forks of the San Gabriel. Soon the Corps engineers would abandon their argument that politics could indeed influence dam placement. Political push had absolutely no role to play — impossible! — in the Army’s scientifically calibrated engineering decisions, Corps engineers later asserted. Williamson County paid that argument no mind at all.

The Taylor City Hall news did not take Williamson County totally by surprise. Since March 1946, when the San Gabriel Valley near Laneport was crawling with Army surveyors, some people had suspected the worst. Henry Benjamin Fox, who was editor-owner of *The Granger News* as well as Wilson Fox’s

brother, heard alarm bells. He headlined his exclusive, “Dam Surveying (Some Spell it Differently) Causing Worry”:

Various rumors are circulating, including some which are of the nature of practical jokes. For example, one report has it that a dam will be built near Friendship and will back water up to the level of the bridge at Circleville, which would just about submerge the eastern half of Williamson County . . .

.¹¹³

The “rumor” was somewhat exaggerated, but accurate in its essentials. Here it was again, twenty months later, coming out of the mouths of Army engineers whose job it was to stop flooding! What really astounded county leaders was the Army’s contemptuous attitude about impounding the San Gabriel at its upper forks. The soil was poor there, scratch-thin caliche. Dams west of Georgetown would protect the agricultural wealth of Williamson County against flooding and soil erosion, unlike the Army’s plan, which gave the county nothing. Nobody could understand the Army’s thinking. They didn’t realize that downstream powers — Milam County, Texas rice farmers, and Dow Chemical — were calling the shots.

By November 1948, when Army civil engineers met the people of Williamson County at Taylor City Hall, the notion of damming the upper reaches of the San Gabriel was a still cherished, even sacrosanct, local ambition. In his time,

¹¹³*Granger News*, March 28, 1946

Congressman “Buck” Buchanan had supported it. Congressman Johnson had supported it for the better part of a decade. The Brazos River Authority had formally backed it twice since 1935.

The county’s historic quest for dams had so completely focused on the San Gabriel’s upper forks it is no wonder that on November 23, 1948, the crowd at Taylor City Hall was struck dumb — and then yelled — when they heard the two dams they had wanted for years would be rolled into one big one at Laneport, which would not only provide no flood protection for the county’s richest farm land, but flood it permanently. And there seemed to be little hope of changing the Army’s mind.

4

The Salesman

Back in his Galveston office from his encounter with Williamson County, Colonel Norman relaxed. The worst was over. If the county's reception to the Army's plan to plug the San Gabriel River at Laneport was not exactly warm, it was reasonably polite. The farmers around the dam site hated it, of course, but that was to be expected. And the Georgetown contingent — it hated Laneport, too, but had mouthed lukewarm support. From Norman's perspective, the Army's Laneport plan was flawless: it gave more effective regional flood protection to the Brazos River

basin than dams on the upper San Gabriel could ever achieve; it also would cost little more than the two upper San Gabriel dams but would hold twice the water.¹¹⁴ The politics were simple. Wilson Fox, Williamson County's political mastermind, strongly favored Laneport as did Congressman Poage, a resourceful backer of the Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District and its plan to build multiple dams, which, of course, were potentially Army projects. The San Gabriel even flowed its last few miles through Milam County, in Poage's district. Poage's old counterpart in the House of Representatives, Lyndon Johnson, who as congressman might have insisted on the upper fork San Gabriel dams, had distanced himself from the issue after being elected to the Senate. The new congressman, Homer Thornberry, didn't seem the type to balk the Army's vaunted engineers.

Colonel Norman judged Laneport's opponents a motley crew — a bunch of inarticulate Czech farmers who didn't want to be uprooted and relocated and a loud-mouthed salesman named Sherrill from Georgetown, flogging a Chamber of Commerce clinging to an outmoded plan to dam the river near Georgetown, for reasons no better than civic boosterism. In Norman's view, Sherrill's worry over "rampaging floodwaters" was hyperbolic bunk. The Army's job was to analyze the Brazos River system,

¹¹⁴Laneport's superiority as a regional flood control structure stemmed from its placement low on the San Gabriel, after the river's tributaries had dumped their loads in, but above the Little River, which regularly flooded Milam County — which Congressman Poage represented and wanted to protect.

design the best *regional* solution for flood control and build it. *That* was the Army's charge — not to fret over Williamson County's flooding fate, or what the human and economic cost of Laneport dam might be.

In 1948, the Army Corps of Engineers dominated water policy in America. Founded at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1802, the Corps had long regarded itself as the Army's most rarified elite. Its earliest cadets married Congressmen's daughters; Senators appointed friends' sons to West Point. Breeding had produced a tightly connected "inner" circle of Army engineers and backers in Congress, politicizing public works engineering from the start. In 1830 a former West Point superintendent criticized the Corps as "a privileged order of the very worst class . . . a military aristocracy." Over time, reform watered down the "aristocracy," and the Army engineers learned the art of adaptability, from designing ironclad battle rams to dredging navigable canals from shallow rivers during peace time.¹¹⁵ During World War II they performed brilliantly. In the post-war explosion of American development, Army engineers coasted on their reputation as crackerjack war-time technologists and trolled for work to keep their specialists employed.

But the Corps' old mistrust of "outsiders" — including other military branches, civilian engineers, and "local interests" that

¹¹⁵Todd Shallat, *Structures in the Stream* (1994), University of Texas Press, Austin, 188, 189

might interfere with their “scientific” works — died hard. Over the years, Army waterway science “reduced river construction to a series of standardized steps,” deftly bypassing the human element. The Army engineers worshiped at the alter of what they considered a science, holding their “faith in problem-solving through quantification, the view of rivers . . . as technological systems” rather than as part of an organic ecology that included human beings, wildlife and plants.¹¹⁶ The Army engineers’ embrace of the technological fix applied to imponderables like flooding appealed to members of Congress, who discovered after World War II that with big dams proposed to secure the nation’s river systems, they could wallow in the joys of “log-rolling,” or “pork barrel politics.” When “log-rolling” worked properly, congressmen could get “veto-proof legislation” and “something for every region” — a politician’s dream.¹¹⁷

Congressmen adored the Army engineers. When, sooner or later, constituents back home demanded a solution to a local problem (flooding, drouth, irrigation, “booming” a town with a dependable water supply), the politician could deliver up a nice, solid dam. Using what was termed the congressional “courtesy” or “buddy” system, members almost always voted for each other’s water works legislation, whether the individual project

¹¹⁶*Water and Community Development: Social and Economic Perspective*, edited by Donald R. Field, James C. Barron, Burl F. Long (1974), Ann Arbor Science, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 280; *ibid.*, 1-4, 155-157, 184, 206-7

¹¹⁷Shallat, 5

made sense or not. Down the line, if everyone cooperated, every congressman would get something for his or her district. Here is how historian Marc Reisner described it:

To a degree that is impossible for most people to fathom, water projects are the grease gun that lubricates the nation's legislative machinery. Congress without water projects would be like an engine without oil; it would simply seize up.¹¹⁸

In other words, dams were the best federal subsidy most congressmen could ever hope to bring home. To members of Congress, the Army engineers were like Santa Claus: if you were very, very good (and supported *all* dam projects, regardless of merit), your district would get a juicy plum of a dam. If you were bad (and failed to vote for Corps projects), your district's hope of getting any public works project was slim. William Gianelli described the prevailing situation after President Ronald Reagan appointed him to head the Army engineers: "Over the years, the Corps had been very used to considering itself almost an arm of Congress."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert* (1984), Penguin, New York, 308-309

¹¹⁹Robert Gottlieb, *A Life of Its Own: The Politics and Power of Water* (1988) Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 66

Colonel Norman pondered Owen Sherrill, the man who had set up the Taylor City Hall meeting through the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce. Sherrill seemed the most obvious threat to the Army's plans — the sort of “vigorous individual with influence” the Army most disliked, unless, of course, its engineers wanted the project badly enough to work *with* that individual.¹²⁰ This was not such a case. For months before the meeting, Sherrill had pestered Texas politicians and the Army brass with a steady stream of letters expounding on the need for dams *above* Georgetown on the San Gabriel's forks — dams the Army deigned to build. Sherrill had aimed most of his verbiage at Senator Lyndon Johnson. The two had met in 1935 while Sherrill was criss-crossing South Texas for the New Deal's Farm Production Credit Association and Johnson was working for Congressman Richard Kleberg, in theory a mere secretary but in reality as *de facto* congressman.¹²¹ Apparently Johnson and Sherrill took to each other, for a warm and enduring correspondence ensued. Before the Taylor City Hall meeting, Sherrill had beseeched his old friend “to put your shoulder to the

¹²⁰John Graves, *The Water Hustlers* (1971), Sierra Club, New York, 45; Philip V. Scarpino, *Great River* (1985) University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 167-169; Robert Kelley Schneiders, *Unruly River* (1999) University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 256

¹²¹Letter, Sherrill to Poage, Nov. 24, 1969, Poage Papers, Baylor Collection of Political Materials, Box 692, File 7, Waco

wheel in behalf of your old District and help [Georgetown] get the allocation of the two Dams on the San Gabriel.”¹²²

Sherrill was tough, resilient and opportunistic. Though not a member of Williamson County’s “elite” class — ranchers, “big” farmers, and money men — he moved easily in those circles. He cultivated political power as faithfully as he attended Georgetown’s First Baptist Church, believing one sure way to advance was to win over Washington’s policy makers. He built clout through his adroit use of groups. In 1948, anticipating the Army’s choice of the Laneport dam site, Sherrill refashioned the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce into an aggressive fighting force, creating a small committee with a mundane name, Committee on Water Conservation, and running it as if it were a military invasion. Sherrill simply overwhelmed the opposition with requests for technical information, new ideas needing investigation and letters of praise or condemnation. When he thought policy makers were getting tired of hearing from him, he unleashed new voices from his committee, mostly Georgetown’s smartest lawyers and financiers. He traveled constantly, often to Capitol Hill to flatter and cajole the Texas congressional delegation.

Sherrill lived and breathed land deals. Whether advertising Crockett Gardens (“A TEXAS LOCATION SUPREME — 7 miles NW of

¹²²Letter, Sherrill to Johnson, Nov. 6, 1948, House File, Box 314, LBJ Library

Georgetown, Texas, on the beautiful N San Gabriel River with ever-flowing springs, 2 small lakes, traversed by the most beautiful part of the river with fishing, hunting and luxurious living — summer and winter — TOPS”), representing future Senator Lloyd M. Bentsen’s South Texas ranching interests or closing a 1958 sale on a five million dollar federal center in Fort Worth, Sherrill pursued his calling with the zeal of a street evangelist.¹²³

“That man could sell anything. He was the best salesman I ever saw,” remembered Esther Weir, a long-time Georgetown rancher.¹²⁴

“Sherrill was ‘Ranch King’ of Williamson County for many, many years,” said Austin’s Tom Kouri, who made millions of dollars investing in Williamson County real property.¹²⁵

“Owen W. Sherrill was effective because he was such a relentless and persistent person,” retired Georgetown banker Jay Sloan said of him. “He didn’t give up on his project. In a lot of cases, people would give in to him just to get him to shut up.”¹²⁶

¹²³Multiple Listing Service, Institute of Farm Brokers, Chicago, Ill., May 10, 1953; Letter, Lloyd M. Bentsen to Sherrill, May 25, 1955, Sherrill Papers, Cushing Library, College Station; “Sherrill Scores Again!”, *Williamson County Sun*, Aug. 21, 1958, Cushing Library. The multi-million deal in Fort Worth was by no means a fluke: the previous year, Sherrill had brokered a \$4.5 million skyscraper sale in Houston.

¹²⁴Interview: Esther Weir, Georgetown, Jan. 19, 2001

¹²⁵Interview: Tom Kouri, Austin, Sept. 22, 2000

¹²⁶Interview: Jay Sloan, Georgetown, Sept. 11, 2000

The Depression would have broken a man of gentler spirit. Born in East Texas in 1890, Sherrill graduated in 1910 from Texas A&M University.¹²⁷ In 1917, he became Williamson County's first extension agent.¹²⁸ After the 1921 flood, Sherrill led a Red Cross team assessing damage around Georgetown, Jonah and Weir — a nasty job that must have strengthened his strong convictions about checking the river above Georgetown so it could never again swamp the intensely developed farm land below.¹²⁹

After four years as county agent, Sherrill was “drafted into banking,” as he put it.¹³⁰ In 1922, he went to work for City National Bank in Georgetown and became its president. During eleven years there, Sherrill served for a time as treasurer of the Texas Bankers' Association.¹³¹ But City National failed in 1933, a casualty of the Depression. “He had the bank that went broke in the Thirties and, oh, it hurt so many people,” remembers a contemporary businessman. “He had two sons and a wife, and he just walked off. He abandoned them. One of his sons was a cripple. His wife became a recluse and a town character.”¹³² An

¹²⁷Interview: David Chapman, Cushing Library, College Station, Ap. 14, 2000

¹²⁸*Landman*, July 1964

¹²⁹*Williamson County Sun*, Sept. 16, 1921

¹³⁰Letter, Sherrill to Poage, Nov. 24, 1969, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 7, BCPM

¹³¹“History of Owen Sherrill,” not dated, *Austin American-Statesman* morgue

¹³²Interview: Ed Evans, Georgetown, April 2000. Both of Sherrill's sons died in the early 1960s, one of a scuba-diving accident at nearby Lake Travis; the other of poor health.

admirer of Sherrill's could not forget that episode, either. "It was a sad thing. His first wife became sort of a ragsack Annie."¹³³

Sherrill actually left Georgetown in 1932, *before* his bank folded. Summoned to Washington, D. C., he later recalled telling the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, "I am just a country banker from Texas sitting on a keg of dynamite, smoking a cigarette, and wondering when my bank will blow up. I have seen some 60 of my friends turn in their charters for lack of money in the banks and I am wondering when my time will come."¹³⁴

Instead of waiting, he snagged a job helping create President Herbert Hoover's emergency crop production loan program for Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. When he arrived in Dallas, where the program was to be headquartered, "there were nearly 1000 persons looking for jobs. They were good people from all over Texas We fenced off the north end of the Baker Hotel wherein we went to work . . . and in 2 years has [sic] the lowest cost of operation and the highest collection record in the USA."¹³⁵ He moved to Houston and struggled with personal debt, but by 1941 he had acquired a new wife, returned to Georgetown and established the Owen W. Sherrill Agency, "Creator of Ownership."

If Sherrill felt shame or embarrassment about his family history, he kept it hidden. He and his second wife Kay embarked

¹³³Interview: J.D. Thomas Jr., Sept. 8, 2000, Georgetown

¹³⁴Letter, Sherrill to Poage, *ibid.*

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, Sherrill to Poage

on building a national real estate reputation and pulled it off. He became president of the National Institute of Farm Brokers and of the Texas Real Estate Association's Board of Directors. He earned many honors, including "Texas Realtor of the Year" and "All Time Texas Farm and Land Broker." He served eighteen years as director for the National Association of Real Estate Boards, using his frequent convention trips to cement business and political relationships.¹³⁶

In 1948, Sherrill wanted dams on the upper San Gabriel and he pursued them relentlessly. Before the Army obliterated his hopes at Taylor City Hall, Sherrill tried to woo Wilson Fox to join with Georgetown to get *three* dams on the San Gabriel. Sherrill wrote Fox:

I am in hearty accord in getting any and all dams possible on the San Gabriel, and while I do know that heavy political wires have been pulled to get the Laneport Dam, I personally take my hat off to the Powers, and salute as the winner passes . . . I am for you and the Laneport Dam . . . But we are definitely interested in securing what the Government years ago proposed on the San Gabriel River west of Georgetown . . . We are going after the Georgetown dams and asking your cooperation . . . ¹³⁷

¹³⁶"History of Owen W. Sherrill," *ibid.*

¹³⁷Letter, Sherrill to Wilson Fox, Nov. 6, 1948, House File, Box 314, LBJ Library

Sherrill's flattery failed to impress Fox. In fact, his strategy — officially supporting Laneport while sniping at it — backfired. Laneport's handful of backers, headed by Wilson Fox, maintained that Georgetown's word could not be trusted. The claim had some merit. The day after Taylor City Hall meeting, during which "Mr. Sherrill brought the more than 35 [Georgetown] representatives to their feet as a token of their support of [Laneport]," Georgetown changed its position.¹³⁸ In a letter to the *Williamson County Sun* Sherrill retreated from Georgetown's "total" support of the previous week. The italics are mine:

While we are in accord with the location of a dam at Laneport *if such dam would serve a useful purpose to the citizens of Williamson County and if the people whose land will be inundated are in favor of a dam at that location*, I still feel that a dam or dams West of Georgetown will be necessary *before* a Laneport dam could be made to control the rushing floodwaters originating in the higher terrain in the Western portion of the county.¹³⁹

To turn the Army engineers around, Georgetown needed the Brazos River District on its side. *Sun* editor Sharpe had already queried civil engineer John Alexander Norris, the revered creator of the Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District, about his opinion of Laneport. "The army must have at least thought they had a good reason for changing the Gabriel setup," Norris

¹³⁸"Georgetown Panel Offers Aid To Secure Reservoir," *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 26, 1948

¹³⁹Letter to the Editor, Sherrill, *Williamson County Sun*, Dec. 3, 1948, 4

wrote back. “But the soundness of the change has not appeared to me.”¹⁴⁰ Sharpe had forwarded Norris’s note to Lyndon Johnson.

Now that the Army had actually recommended Laneport, Georgetown wanted Brazos officials to press the Army to restudy the San Gabriel Valley. This would be tricky because the Brazos district needed several dams built quickly to strengthen its fragile economic base through hydroelectric sales. Any delay would hurt.

The day after the Taylor meeting, Georgetown’s Chamber manager wrote to the Brazos water district’s manager expressing Georgetown’s reservations about Laneport.¹⁴¹ Sherrill immediately “punched up” one of his “elite” connections, the Brazos River Authority’s general counsel, John D. McCall of Dallas. As a young lawyer, McCall had served as Governor William D. Hobby’s secretary and developed powerful political connections. His sister was married to Georgetown’s postmaster, Dr. Hobson Martin, a shy and childless Boy Scout leader and an oddity in 1948 Texas: a Republican. McCall already favored the dams at Georgetown, though like most Texans interested in water resources, he believed in dams as the state’s salvation and thought it best to build as many as possible at Washington’s expense. He had driven from Dallas to attend the Taylor meeting

¹⁴⁰Letter, John Alexander Norris to John Sharpe, Nov. 7, 1947, House, Box 314, LBJ Library

¹⁴¹Letter, Fred Pool to R.D. Collins, Nov. 24, 1948, Box 59, BRA

and had been distressed at a “glaring” headline in the *Austin Statesman* that read, “Georgetown Rebuffed On Dam Plans.”¹⁴² McCall sent Chamber manager Fred Pool the clipping along with his opinion that the “discrepancies” in the “figures and calculations announced by Colonel Norman while he was making his talk” could be used “in support of the resolution which I hoped will be adopted by the Public Works Committee of Congress authorizing specifically further study of the proposed dams West of Georgetown.” He thought Colonel Norman had “rather invited” Congressman Thornberry to present such a resolution. “Please be assured,” he added, “that the writer as an employee of the Brazos District, as well as in his personal capacity, will be very happy to cooperate with you and with the good people of Williamson County in furthering these enterprises.”¹⁴³

Sherrill leaped on McCall’s suggestion, writing Colonel Norman to ask him to send him the resolution form Congressman Thornberry needed to officially request a “reconsideration” of Laneport in favor of dams near Georgetown.¹⁴⁴ The Army stalled. A month later, after repeated queries from Sherrill, Colonel Norman asked the Georgetown realtor to postpone “sending” the resolution (which, of course, Sherrill did not possess) until the

¹⁴²“Georgetown Rebuffed,” Dave Shanks, *Austin American*, Nov. 24, 1948

¹⁴³Letter, John D. McCall to Pool, Dec. 13, 1948, Box 59, BRA

¹⁴⁴Letter, Sherrill to Norman, Dec. 23, 1948, Brazos River 100-675 Box 36E12, Army Corps of Engineers, National Archives, Ft. Worth

House Public Works Committee had approved the Corps' work on the Brazos River and Congress had authorized it. "[A]ny action to secure a review of the conditions on the San Gabriel Rivers [sic] before Congressional approval of the Brazos River report may rebound in such a manner as to force the return of the entire comprehensive report for review, thereby delaying development of the entire Brazos watershed," Colonel Norman warned. "The proper time for requesting a resolution . . . is *after* approval of the current report."¹⁴⁵

Sherrill bowed to Norman's request. He would ask for the resolution at the "proper time," he wrote, adding, "We are again requesting you to furnish us such a resolution at the opportune time, and depending upon you and your united cooperation."¹⁴⁶ It was a tactical mistake from the point of view of Laneport's opponents.

The Army tried to paint Sherrill as a land speculator in his quest for upriver dams. One division head wrote another, "I suspect, but cannot prove, that Mr. Sherrill is interested in property in the upper reservoirs and that this accounts for his anxiety to secure a review of reports."¹⁴⁷ Actually Sherrill owned no land anywhere along the San Gabriel River, but he believed in the legitimacy of his cause. He also believed, correctly, that the

¹⁴⁵Letter, Norman to Sherrill, Dec. 31, 1948, *ibid.* My emphasis.

¹⁴⁶Letter, Sherrill to Norman, Jan. 4, 1949, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷Letter, B.L. Robinson to Henry Hutchings, Jr., Jan. 13, 1949, Army Corps of Engineers Ft. Worth-Dallas, Civil Works Project Files 1934-61, Brazos River, Box 36E12, National Archives, Ft. Worth

best way to “grow” Georgetown (and his business) was to transform the rocky hills of western Williamson County into a lake environment.

Over the next few months, John McCall, the Brazos district’s lawyer, shaped Georgetown’s political and legal strategy — from the timing of the proposed congressional resolution to the resolution’s language and logic. The value of McCall’s legal advice cannot be overestimated. Nor could the fact that he was advising Sherrill and others in Georgetown in ways that undercut the Army’s Laneport plan fail to impress directors of the Brazos Conservation and Reclamation District, who depended on him for legal and political counsel. McCall’s advice to Georgetown was remarkably detailed. In one letter, for instance, McCall compliments Sherrill on his “excellent reasons for impounding in the upper hills as much as possible of the flood waters . . .” but suggests,

You might consider the advisability of emphasizing the advantages of obtaining as much of the storage as practicable above Georgetown for the threefold reasons you have indicated: (a) lower economic value of lands in the hills; (b) protection of lands between upper reservoirs and Laneport; and (c) reduction of valuable submerged land at Laneport. At the same time you might consider the advantages of eliminating the position that sufficient flood storage will be attained by providing 2950 acres at North San Gabriel, 1600 at South San Gabriel and 2890 at Laneport. This would mean a total of flood storage at the 3 dams of 6440 acres, whereas, the Army engineers now

think a total of 11,960 acres is needed. In other words, it might take quite a bit of “selling” . . . ¹⁴⁸

He also tosses in an “off the record” tip.

Usually, a stronger case can be made for ‘up-stream’ people by making an affirmative case for the benefits of the up-stream storage with only objective consideration for the lesser amount of lower valley land saved. By this I mean that to the extent that it can be demonstrated that there will be less disturbance of landowners and less total dollar cost of land will be used by virtue of the revised plans, the revision will be favored. But the individual reluctance of landowners to give up their land will not be considered as very important . . . So usually upstream people do not improve their case by making common cause with the owners of the proposed submerged land.”¹⁴⁹

It was an important point that Sherrill, with his Georgetown allies, disregarded. Williamson County citizens, agrarian in outlook and economics, simply did not want to see upwards of one hundred and fifty farm families — among the most productive farmers in the state — forced off their land, and with no flood control for the county in the bargain, either. By March, Sherrill was anxious. Had the Army misled him? “We have certainly cooperated with you, are patiently awaiting the resolution for our Congressman to use in request for consideration of the two dams at Georgetown,” Sherrill reminded

¹⁴⁸Letter, McCall to Sherrill, Jan. 10, 1949, Box 59, BRA

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

Colonel Norman. “We are . . . now most kindly asking that you give us the resolution promised . . .”¹⁵⁰

On March 21, Colonel Norman finally agreed to send Sherrill the magical resolution — but only if Sherrill *insisted*. “[I] am only trying to point out what might happen to the basin-wide plan should the subject review be proposed on a watershed prior to approval of justified and recommended works,” Norman wrote, implying that the entire Brazos watershed scheme was doomed if Georgetown persisted in requesting a resurvey. “If you still consider it advisable to ask Congressman Thornberry to initiate such a review now we will be glad to cooperate in furnishing a proposed draft of the review resolution . . . at your request.”¹⁵¹

By this time, Sherrill had gone public, urging the Williamson County Commissioners Court, headed by the most respected politician in the county, Judge Sam V. Stone, to ask the Army to reconsider Laneport dam. After hearing protests from “hundreds” of farmers and businessmen, Stone and all four county commissioners forwarded a resolution to Senator Johnson and Congressman Thornberry requesting a “reconsideration” of the Laneport dam plan, “to the end that the results achieved . . . can render a maximum protection to the citizenship of Williamson County . . . and that the best land . . . will not be converted into a

¹⁵⁰Letter, Sherrill to Norman, March 10, 1949, Army Corps of Engineers, Central Files, Box 36, National Archives, Fort Worth

¹⁵¹Letter, Norman to Sherrill, March 21, 1949, *Ibid*.

shallow lake basin and cause some two or three hundred farmers to be displaced and the danger of further destructive floods in Williamson County will not be lessened.”¹⁵² The county officially opposed Laneport dam. The editor of the *Williamson County Sun* summed up the prevailing sentiment:

At the outset of the dam activity at a meeting at Taylor, Congressman Thornberry stated that he would like to see the county get together on what it wanted, and then let him know. There is every evidence, Mr. Congressman, that the county has decided, definitely, that the upper dams should receive primary consideration.¹⁵³

Since November, a small flood of communications from Williamson County had poured into Senator Johnson’s office — the county commissioners’ resolution, two petitions signed by eighty people and nearly two hundred letters and newspaper articles — all hostile to Laneport Dam. Only one person endorsed it — the owner of the Hare cotton gin, located just below the proposed Laneport dam.¹⁵⁴ Johnson was fond of Williamson County, which had always given him thumping large voting margins. So he picked up the phone and talked to the man he trusted most in Williamson County.

¹⁵²Resolution of the Commissioners Court of Williamson County, March 18, 1949, Senate File 1949-61, Rivers & Harbors 1949-53, Box 847, LBJ Library

¹⁵³Don Scarbrough, “Dam Public Opinion,” *Passing glance* . . . April 14, 1949, *Williamson County Sun*

¹⁵⁴Letter, George D. Bohlen to Johnson, March 25, 1949, Senate File 1949-61, Rivers & Harbors 1949-53, Laneport, LBJ Library

Harris A. Melasky was a soft-spoken, unpretentious attorney with a Taylor practice specializing in oil and gas. He had grown up hard, the son of a Jewish peddler-turned-merchant in a place where Jews were viewed with suspicion, if not hostility. Small and wiry, Melasky had played football for the University of Texas.¹⁵⁵ His honesty and political acumen were regarded as stellar, and he had prospered by keeping his oil refinery clients in business despite World War II embargoes, with Johnson's help. Since then, on several occasions Melasky had saved Johnson's political campaigns from financial disaster.¹⁵⁶ Now, Johnson asked Melasky to investigate the Laneport imbroglio. Melasky's investigation, a model of dispassionate fact-finding mixed with political pragmatism, showed why Johnson valued his friend's judgment. "My Dear Lyndon," Melasky began his report,

I find that there is no organized group favoring the construction of [Laneport] dam with the possible exception of the committee of the Taylor Chamber of Commerce. There is considerable organized opposition. One group is composed of the Granger people and the other group is composed of the people at Georgetown who desire the

¹⁵⁵Oral History: J.J. "Jake" Pickle, May 31, 1970, I-12, LBJ Library

¹⁵⁶Ibid., I-13

dams built in that area. The people at Taylor, in my opinion . . . are rather disinterested . . . ”¹⁵⁷

Melasky ticked off six “reasons for opposition” to Laneport. At the top of his list were the “small Czech farmers” fighting for their homes and land. There were other arguments against Laneport: it would hurt Granger merchants, who were solidly against it; give Williamson County no flood protection; sink prospects for the dams Georgetown favored; and remove substantial monies from local tax rolls. He proffered no arguments for supporting Laneport. “From my conversation with various parties at both Georgetown and Taylor,” Melasky noted,

I stressed the point that unless the dam was built at Laneport there would be no dam built. In nearly every instance, the parties replied that rather than have the dam at Laneport they would prefer that a dam not be built on the San Gabriel River. Frankly, those at Georgetown feel that if they can stop the Laneport dam, they ultimately may be able to get the dams erected at Georgetown.¹⁵⁸

Melasky’s final word, however, was aimed not at the reasonableness of the Laneport or Georgetown dams but on how the issue would play politically. “I doubt if this issue would lose

¹⁵⁷Letter, Melasky to Johnson: April 22, 1949, Senate File 1949-61 Rivers & Harbors, Box 847, LBJ Library

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

you any substantial number of votes even if the dam should be built at Laneport,” he wrote. “On the other hand, you would probably gain votes in other sections of the State which would be benefited by this dam. However, if the dam should not be built, I doubt if it would materially affect you with the voters of Taylor.”

In other words, Johnson could get downstream voters and financial backers beholden to the rice farming industry and Dow Chemical. Let the engineers decide, Melasky advised. If they “deem it in the public interest to erect the dam at Laneport, then certainly you should not oppose it. On the other hand, if the engineers should change their views . . . then I believe you should . . . not attempt to force the construction at Laneport.”¹⁵⁹

Then and there, it appears, Lyndon Johnson made up his mind about the San Gabriel dams. He would steer clear of them. He would sympathize with afflicted parties, provide information and technical assistance when it was sought, but he would not take sides. Instead, as Melasky counseled, along with most members of Congress, he allowed himself to “be guided by the views” of the Army engineers.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

Nobody could bring the argument to a conclusion. It was the start of a long war of frustration and growing animosity that exacerbated an old rivalry between Georgetown and Taylor. It didn't help feelings among Taylor's leaders that the new national defense interstate highway route appeared to be routed through Georgetown, not Taylor. In June, Congressman Thornberry, pressed by Granger, Georgetown and Taylor, requested that Congress pass the Laneport Amendment. He and the chief Army engineer in Galveston agreed to keep news of the amendment secret — except within Army engineering circles.¹⁶¹ Already he was sick of Laneport. He was also sick of Owen Sherrill. "May I suggest," he cautioned the new Army chief engineer at Galveston,

that Mr. Norman be very careful in relaying any plans which Colonel Robinson and I discussed to any of the people in Williamson County. I note in your letter you state that Mr. Norman is keeping in close touch with Mr. Sherrill. In my opinion, a great deal of the misunderstanding which has arisen has been due to the fact that there has been too much local discussion.¹⁶²

Thornberry's Laneport Amendment made no headway in Congress and the Army erected a protective shield around its Laneport project. Sherrill tried to pry maps out of the Army's Galveston office, maps the Army Corps' survey teams should have

¹⁶¹Letter, Thornberry to Col. Ellsworth I. Davis, June 27, 1949, Army Corps of Engineers, Central Files, Box 36, National Archives, Ft. Worth

¹⁶²Ibid.

made after studying dam sites above Georgetown.¹⁶³ He never got the maps nor, for that matter, could he get any hard evidence that Corps engineers had even investigated the Georgetown dam sites before choosing Laneport.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the Army blocked new attempts by Thornberry to get Congress to pass a resolution to restudy the San Gabriel River.

Like Sherrill, McCall suspected the Corps of misleading the pro-Georgetown dam folks. He had asked an Army engineer, “point blank,” whether it was not now time for the Georgetown people to “properly ask” for the resolution. The Corps man said no, the resolution had to wait until *after* Congress authorized Laneport. “Very frankly,” McCall wrote his brother-in-law, “my recollection is that as soon as the [Flood Control] Committee has acted on the report it would be all right to ask that the resolution be adopted by the Committee.” Congressman Tom Pickett, a member of the Flood Control Committee, assured McCall this was the correct procedure. “I am definitely committed to Mr. Sherrill and to the Georgetown people to help them . . . get a resolution adopted . . . for further study on these projects,” McCall wrote.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³Letter, Sherrill to Johnson, Jan. 24, 1950, Senate File 1949-61, Rivers & Harbors 1949-53 Box 847, LBJ Library

¹⁶⁴Letter, Sherrill to Thornberry, Oct. 17, 1952, Box 59, BRA

¹⁶⁵Letter, McCall to Dr. Hobson Martin, March 20, 1950, Box 59, BRA

But neither the Laneport dam nor its Georgetown alternatives made any real progress. Between 1950 and 1957 and mountains of correspondence, Sherrill, McCall, Thornberry and Poage attempted, time after time, to break through the San Gabriel River logjam so that *some* dam could be built on the San Gabriel River, to little effect. Sherrill suggested developing hydroelectric power on the upper San Gabriel, an impractical notion which consulting engineers pooh-poohed after McCall asked them to evaluate it.¹⁶⁶ Sherrill also pitched an idea which resurfaced over the years: combine the planned interstate highway with dams over the San Gabriel River west of Georgetown. DeWitt C. Greer, Texas' chief road builder, politely dismissed that prospect.¹⁶⁷ Congress eventually authorized Laneport, along with the other Brazos projects, in the Flood Control Act of 1954, triggering a vigorous letter-writing campaign orchestrated by Sherrill for the long-awaited restudy of the San Gabriel. Congressman Thornberry prodded Congress into

¹⁶⁶Letters, Sherrill to McCall, Sept. 19, 1951; McCall to Sherrill, Nov. 8, 1951, McCall to C.R. Marks, Sept. 3, 1953; Marks to McCall, Sept. 16, 1953; San Gabriel Dams, Box 59, BRA

¹⁶⁷Letter, DeWitt C. Greer to Sherrill, Dec. 22, 1954; Sherrill to Collins, Jan. 4, 1954; I-35/Dam, Box 59, BRA. Two years later, the Williamson County Farm Bureau, led by Martin W. Bergstrom of Georgetown, sent a petition and several letters to Senator Johnson's office promoting the combination of an Inter-Regional Highway and dam at Georgetown, rather than at Laneport. But this effort was no more successful than Sherrill's. See Martin W. Bergstrom to Lyndon B. Johnson, July 28, 1956 and Arthur C. Perry to Bergstrom, July 31, 1956, Senate Case & Project File 1956, Box 1230, LBJ Library

approving a restudy on July 29, 1955.¹⁶⁸ But the Army got no money to study the San Gabriel, so nothing happened.¹⁶⁹

It was the river itself that resurrected the San Gabriel dams. Had the San Gabriel's flood-prone behavior not briefly united Williamson County, it is unlikely that any of the dams ever would have cleared Congress, for congressmen were reluctant to appropriate money for civil works projects that split political power bases back home. But the early Fifties brought drought to Texas and changed attitudes about flood control and water supply. Instead of focusing on controlling floods, civic leaders worried more about their cities' growing thirst. They still wanted dams, but now they wanted to store flood waters that, during Texas' wet periods, rushed uselessly — wastefully, in the context of the times — into the Gulf of Mexico. McCall first seized on the notion of building dams on the San Gabriel's upper forks for flood control *and* water storage, which the Brazos water district could then sell to downriver irrigators, or to cities needing more

¹⁶⁸Public Law 780, 83rd Congress, Flood Control Act of 1954, cited by Senator Johnson in "Resurvey of San Gabriel River," August 1957, Senate Case & Project 1957, Box 1339, LBJ Library; Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., *Waters of the Brazos* (1981), Texian Press, Waco, 122

¹⁶⁹Letter, Brigadier General J.L. Person to Johnson, March 4, 1957, Senate Case and Project File 1957, Box 1339, LBJ Library

water.¹⁷⁰ It was a novel idea in 1952, when fewer than ten thousand people lived in all of west Williamson County, but one that found growing favor within the Brazos district.

By the summer of 1953, drought had Texas in a death grip. Senator Johnson challenged the nation to underwrite a “coordinated, long-range water program in Texas — a land in which too much sun is followed by too much water.” Such an investment, similar to those the government already had made in California, Arizona and the Tennessee River Valley, would allow Texas to mine its “vast storehouse of undeveloped resources” and give the nation “elbow room in which to grow.”¹⁷¹ The Corps of Engineers, recognizing a niche it could fill, got Congress to vastly broaden its charge: from being limited to building flood control dams and navigation projects, the Army could now provide municipal and industrial water supplies, as well as enhance fish and wildlife stocks and recreational opportunities.

The drought sucked up Williamson County’s water supplies and cracked its vaunted Black Wax into fissures big enough to swallow chickens and small dogs. By August of 1952, Taylor’s wells had dropped to their lowest point ever, due to increasing industrial demand, a growing population and scant rainfall.

¹⁷⁰Letters, McCall to Sherrill, Sept. 11, 1951; McCall to George C. Change, Sept. 26, 1951, McCall to Sherrill, Oct. 10, 1952, *ibid*.

¹⁷¹Speech, Johnson to U.S. Senate, July 29, 1953, Senate Case and Project File, 1949-61, Box 1186, LBJ Library; “Water Supply and the Texas Economy,” Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, July 8, 1953, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, Center for American History, Austin

Thorndale, the county's fourth largest town, had to truck its drinking water from Taylor. For the first time, Taylor's city commissioners appealed to Senator Johnson and Congressman Thornberry to authorize Laneport Dam. They needed water.¹⁷²

Meanwhile, the long drought, combined with flash floods, nearly brought the Brazos River Authority to its knees. One of its biggest customers, Dow Chemical, demanded more water and the BRA obliged, but in a deal that crippled the river authority economically.¹⁷³ On the other hand, not doing the deal could have caused Dow to "shut down and seriously disrupt the economy of the Gulf Coast."¹⁷⁴ The politically potent rice growers on the Texas Coast also demanded more water released from Brazos reservoirs for their crops. "I think we just about have the rice growers straightened out," Brazos manager R.D. Collins wrote. "However, at the rate they are now drawing on [Lake] Whitney for water, I am afraid that the 50,000 acre feet will soon be exhausted and we will have another crisis on hands before the rice crop is cured."¹⁷⁵

The ramifications ricocheted upriver to northwest Texas, where the Brazos River District had built its only hydroelectric plant. Morris Sheppard Dam, commonly called Possom Kingdom,

¹⁷²"City Commissioners Support Revival Of Laneport Dam On San Gabriel," *Taylor Times*, Aug. 14, 1952, Box 59, BRA

¹⁷³Hendrickson, 48, 66-68, 84

¹⁷⁴Memorandum, H.S. Hilburn, Dec. 1956, Senate Papers 1956 Case & Project File, Box 1210, LBJ Library

¹⁷⁵Letter, Collins to J. Howard Fox, Aug. 28, 1952, *ibid.*

had kept the Brazos District financially afloat by selling electrical power, but in the Fifties, it was threatening its creators with bankruptcy. During heavy rains of August 1953, Possum Kingdom Lake backed up and overflowed into Salt Creek, which flooded the sewage works in Graham and polluted the city's water supply. The city lodged a politely worded complaint with the Brazos board. The next summer, the Brazos River District announced it would raise the level of Possum Kingdom Dam by fifteen feet, increasing the lake's water storage capacity by 354,000 acre feet. Residents of Graham, a well-heeled oil town of about ten thousand, passionately protested. Then, in the torrential rains of June and September of 1955, Possum Kingdom Lake surged backwards again. Nearly two hundred Graham homes were badly flooded; its sewage plant and waterworks were swamped. Finally, in late April and early May of 1957, when flooding inundated Texas for sixteen days, Graham citizens found themselves bailing flood waters caused by Possum Kingdom Lake. Graham sued and won a \$431,000 judgment. The Brazos River Authority's team of attorneys, led by John McCall, appealed to the Texas Supreme Court, but lost. As the story unfolded, the Brazos River Authority took a pounding from the state press for contesting Graham's claims. The fact was, the agency was hurting financially and its lawyers wanted to avoid setting a precedent. Rowing hard against this legal and public relations disaster, the Brazos directors were attempting to build support for an ambitious Six Dam Plan, which

would transform about two hundred miles of the Brazos River Valley into a solid line of lakes between Possum Kingdom and Lake Whitney. But there was stiff opposition from many quarters. By the end of 1957, the Six Dam Plan was dead.¹⁷⁶

Against this backdrop, controversy within Williamson County over Laneport and the Georgetown dams looked like a footnote at the Brazos River Authority — that is, until it seemed the BRA might lose its right to service part of its watershed. By 1956, the drought had nearly ruined Williamson County's farmers and ranchers. In February 1957, Taylor sounded the Lower Colorado River Authority on the possibility of piping treated water from Lake Travis on the Colorado River to ease the city's water crunch. Excitement in Taylor ran high, fueled by breathless press reports. Six months later, the Williamson County Commissioners Court created a water control and improvement district that included Taylor, Georgetown, Leander, Round Rock, Hutto, Thrall and Thorndale. The plan was to acquire water from Lake Travis through the LCRA, or to build a dam at Georgetown with cooperative local funding, or both. Taylor hired two engineering firms to study costs and benefits of several possible options. It appeared that Williamson County was getting ready to divorce the Brazos River Authority and take a new partner, the

¹⁷⁶Memorandum: March 21, 1955, Walter [Jenkins] to Johnson, Senate Case and Project File, 1956, Box 1210, LBJ Library; Hendrickson, *ibid.*, 84-85

Lower Colorado Water Authority, to meet its water supply needs.¹⁷⁷

The effect was like a rocket lobbed at the BRA's Mineral Wells headquarters. Brazos officials flung themselves into activities aimed at bringing Williamson County back into its fold. Now the BRA would support dams above Georgetown, as well as at Laneport, even if the BRA had to partially fund a Georgetown dam itself. The benefit, of course, was that the BRA could sell the impounded waters to water-starved municipalities (or to whoever needed it), shutting down the possibility of an LCRA invasion across watersheds. In January 1958, J.H. Kultgen, the BRA's board president, conversed with Colonel Walter Wells, the Army's chief regional engineer (who would later become the authority's general manager), about the stalled San Gabriel projects and reported, as if the subject had never come up before, that if Georgetown and Taylor citizens "desired" Laneport or the Georgetown dams, "the [Army] engineers will initiate some studies for which they have money to ascertain whether or not the location is feasible."¹⁷⁸ This was a remarkable statement,

¹⁷⁷Lin Mills, "It Occurs To Me," *Taylor Daily Press*, Feb. 20, 1957; Letter, Sherrill to Collins, April 29, 1957; Minutes of BRA directors meeting, April 15, 1957; Letter, W.S. Gideon to Collins, Aug. 9, 1957; Note on telephone conversations between Collins, Wilson Fox and Gideon, Aug. 20, 1957; Memorandum, Roger Tyler to BRA, Aug. 22, 1957; Letter, Collins to Gideon, Aug. 23, 1957; Letter, Cameron Engineering Co. to the Mayor of Taylor, Dec. 27, 1957; Letter, Freese and Nichols to City of Taylor, Oct. 24, 1958, Box 59, BRA

¹⁷⁸Letter, J.H. Kultgen to Collins, Jan. 29, 1958, *ibid.*

since Congressman Thornberry had been futilely trying to get the San Gabriel resurvey funded for two and a half years.

McCall tried to calm BRA director J. Howard Fox's "anxiety over the situation in which the City of Taylor and another city find themselves" with respect to obtaining "water from the Colorado River source." Fox was agitated because all of his brothers — Wilson, Bryan and Henry — were battling over Laneport, and against each other. Emotions were running so high that the Foxes had ceased speaking. If the BRA could find the revenue, McCall assured Howard Fox, it would join with Taylor and Georgetown and *build* North Fork dam "in the event the Army program is not changed to incorporate such a structure."¹⁷⁹ BRA manager Collins forwarded a detailed proposal to the cities of Taylor and Georgetown "on the possibility of the Authority constructing a dam on one of the San Gabriels near Georgetown to supply water for the Cities of Georgetown, Taylor and neighboring communities." The cost was high but not impossibly so. The better economical answer, Collins admitted, "would be for us to hope and pray that the Army eventually decides to build the 2 dams on the San Gabriels near Georgetown and a smaller Laneport Dam . . . "¹⁸⁰ Thus, a decade after the Army engineers picked Laneport, the Brazos River Authority firmly aligned itself

¹⁷⁹Letter, McCall to J. Howard Fox, April 28, 1958, *ibid.* The other city was probably Thorndale, then the fourth largest city in Williamson County. Round Rock sat conveniently on the pipeline's route, but it was so small it was rarely mentioned until the 1970s.

¹⁸⁰Letter, Collins to J.R. Barclay, May 29, 1958, *ibid.*

on the side of the “local interests” fighting for dams on the upper San Gabriel along with a truncated Laneport — in other words, on Owen Sherrill’s side and against the Corps.

Even with the Brazos River Authority behind it, Congress still dragged its heels on funding a resurvey. Congressman Poage, angry at the decade-long delay of delivering flood control to Milam County, threatened to bury the resurvey for good. In January 1957, in a series of blistering letters, Poage, once so friendly, attacked Sherrill for his county’s intransigence:

All I have ever asked you for was the assurance that you and the people of Williamson County would accept the decision of a resurvey, whatever it may be. I don’t have that assurance. Your letter doesn’t give it to me. On the contrary, while I realize you were very careful not to give me an answer one way or another, I think I can clearly imply [sic] that you haven’t the slightest idea of accepting a decision unless it is the decision you have already made If Williamson County is determined to fight everything except that which her own people have decided is sound engineering, then we don’t need any further engineering I would deeply appreciate it if you would give me a straight, frank answer¹⁸¹

Sherrill’s “frank” answer offered only part of the assurances Poage sought: “Bob, all we ask for is the same protection instead of damage, just as you are asking for below. To do this Bob, will require dams above Georgetown first We will accept the Engineer’s determination as to THE SIZE OF A DAM AT

¹⁸¹Letter, Poage to Sherrill, Jan. 17, 1957, Senate Case & Project, 1957 San Gabriel Dams, Box 1339, LBJ Library

LANEPORT.”¹⁸² Sherrill had Poage over a barrel and Poage knew it. Congress would not budge to fund Laneport until Williamson County convincingly supported it, and this was not happening. Two days after Sherrill sent his “answer,” Poage caved in. “I can say without reservation that I am going to do everything I can to help Homer [Thornberry] get the funds needed for a resurvey of the San Gabriel Dam sites,” he wrote Sherrill.¹⁸³

Once again, Williamson County presented a solid front for the Army’s taking a fresh look at the San Gabriel River: Williamson County, Georgetown, Taylor and Granger governments all called for an immediate resurvey.¹⁸⁴ But even with Poage testily on board and Thornberry pushing, Congress was not inclined to cough up a penny.¹⁸⁵ Then came the flood of 1957.

¹⁸²Letter, Sherrill to Poage, Feb. 5, 1957, *ibid.*

¹⁸³Letter, Poage to Sherrill, Feb. 7, 1957, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴Letter, County Judge Sam V. Stone to Poage, Jan. 14, 1957; Resolution of the City of Georgetown, Jan. 14, 1957; Poage Papers, Box 692, File 4, BCPM; “3-Town Request Calls for Gabriel Dams Re-Survey,” *Williamson County Sun*, March 7, 1957, Senate Case & Project 1957, Box 1339, LBJ Library

¹⁸⁵Letters, Sherrill to Collins, Feb. 25, 1957; Sherrill to Mayor J.T. Atkin, March 11, 1957, Poage Papers, Box 629, File 3, BCPM

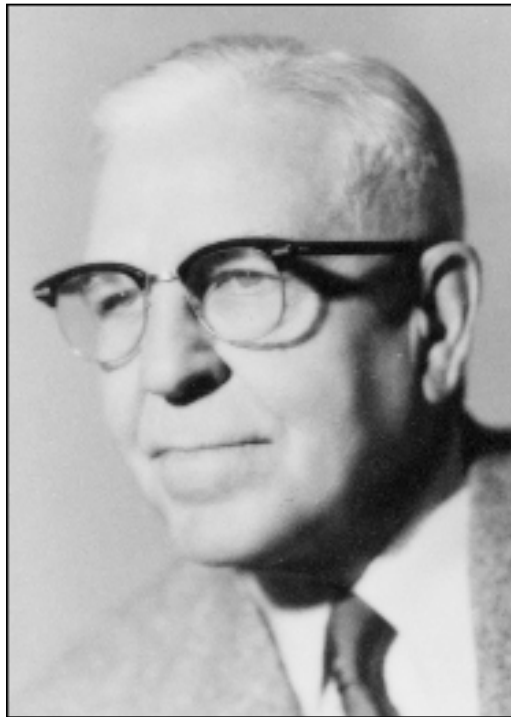


Figure 13: Owen W. Sherrill



Figure 14: The San Gabriel River flooded, east of Georgetown, in 1957.



Figure 15: On Georgetown's Highway 81 bridge at the South San Gabriel, kids watch waters recede in 1957. The segregated George Washington Carver School, left, was razed in the 1960's. The author stands at left..



Figure 16: The South Gabriel slams against the Highway 183 bridge.

Fifteen days of rain filled the state's nearly dry reservoirs and broke a seven-year drought, and then, on April 24, "torrential" storms brought tornados, flooding and several deaths to Central Texas. Much of the misery was felt at Georgetown, where the North Fork and South Fork of the San Gabriel River converged, unleashing a fifty-foot rise that rolled downstream, washing away farms, bridges and railroad tracks. No lives were lost in Williamson County, but damage to Georgetown and the Black Waxy farm land below the county seat was great.¹⁸⁶

A newspaperman flying with Ragsdale Flying Service snapped photographs just as the river's crest swallowed a farm house. "Just east of Georgetown, as the heady brown waters swirled around it, a farmhouse shrugged, crumpled and submerged in less than a minute. Only its roof bobbed above the frothy river as it was swept downstream," he reported.¹⁸⁷ A young aviator named Jim Boutwell flew through a thunderstorm to drop leaflets to the crowd assembled at the Highway 81 bridge crossing the San Gabriel River in Georgetown. "STOP THE TRAIN!" the notes ordered. The dramatic air drop was credited with preventing a train disaster on the M-K-T line at the Katy bridge.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶Papers of John M. Sharpe, "Heavy Rains Trigger Floods Over Twister-Wary Centex," "Georgetown Feels San Gabriel Fury," "Destructive Crest Watched From Air," *Austin American*, April 25, 1957, 1, 2,17

¹⁸⁷Albert Griffith, "Destructive Crest Watched from Air," *Austin American*, April 25, 1957, 17

¹⁸⁸Robert Lucey, "The Flood of '57," *Williamson County Sun*, Oct. 12, 1994. The same Jim Boutwell flew the airplane around the University of Texas Tower until a sharpshooter could pick off Charles Whitman, who killed 21 people in a shooting rampage in 1966. Boutwell

Suddenly the climate toward resurveying the San Gabriel River changed. Now it seemed more obvious than ever that dams were needed west of Georgetown. The river accomplished what nothing else could: it forced Congress's hand. On April 27, three days after the flood roared through Williamson County, Congressman Thornberry released a statement to the press that he would testify before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Public Works in support of a new study of the San Gabriel River.¹⁸⁹ Two days later, Congressman Poage wrote Sherrill that flood control for Williamson County was essential, though he warned, "with the present attitude of the [Eisenhower] Administration, I am not at all sure that we are going to achieve much of anything this year."¹⁹⁰

But Sherrill had covered his bases well, also writing Lyndon Johnson. The Senator's interest in the San Gabriel dams had risen along with the floods and his replies to Sherrill reflected it, striking an action note, rather than the vague sympathy of the past nine years. "I've been keeping in close touch with Homer," he wrote. "As you know, he is scheduled to appear before the Appropriations Committee of the House on May 13 to urge a resurvey of the flood control requirements of the San Gabriel. I

later was elected sheriff of Williamson County and served for many years, until he died of cancer.

¹⁸⁹Press Release from Cong. Thornberry, April 27, 1957, Senate Case & Project 1957, Box 1339, LBJ Library

¹⁹⁰Letter, Poage to Sherrill, April 29, 1957, Poage Papers, Box 629, File 3, BCPM

shall follow all of these developments closely and keep in mind your interest.”¹⁹¹

Two months later, Thornberry’s request still awaited action. Sherrill wrote McCall, confidant of former Governor Dan Moody, John Connally and Lyndon Johnson. McCall followed up with his own note to Senator Johnson. “Our good friend Owen Sherrill of Georgetown wrote me a few days ago that you were optimistic of the prospects of an appropriation for the resurvey of the San Gabriel Rivers,” McCall wrote. “This is indeed encouraging. The Brazos River Authority has thought for several years that there should be a resurvey of this area to develop the possibilities of both flood control and water supply for the people and property situated above the proposed Laneport Project.”¹⁹²

It was the clincher. Three days later Johnson replied in the carefully coded language politicians use with favored supplicants: “As you may know, the appropriation bill is now pending on the Senate Calendar. I am hopeful to get action on it soon. I am glad to know of your interest in this particular item and will keep in mind your views.”¹⁹³ Two weeks later, it was done. The Senate earmarked \$25,000 for the San Gabriel River resurvey. The Army could proceed. Williamson County rejoiced.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹Letter, Johnson to Sherrill, May 2, 1957, Senate Case & Project 1957, Box 1339, LBJ Library

¹⁹²Letter, McCall to Johnson, July 22, 1957, *ibid.*

¹⁹³Letter, Johnson to McCall, July 25, 1957, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴Letter, Don Scarbrough to Johnson, Aug. 9, 1957, *ibid.*

It had taken nine years to force the Army Corps of Engineers to re-examine the San Gabriel Valley, with an eye toward replacing or downsizing Laneport Dam with dams west of Georgetown. Sherrill's courtship of the political and water "elites" finally paid off. Though the power brokers did not always trust him, or even like him, Sherrill's relentless persistence forced them to work with him. In the end, people gave him what he wanted.

5

Henry Fox, the Czechs and “Little” Dams

In 1948, when the Army recommended Laneport dam, the engineers believed, and Congress took it as a given, that flooding problems were best controlled by big dams on the main stems of rivers. The philosophy had but one serious enemy — the small dams movement. As Army engineers hastened to plug the nation’s rivers after the war, the Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service mounted a campaign to build tens of thousands of small earthen dams on the upper tributaries of flood-prone rivers. The idea was to *prevent* flooding at its source,

rather than waiting for epic floods to develop and *then* trying to stop them. The small dams approach enjoyed several theoretical advantages: collectively, it cost much less than big dams, stopped agricultural soil from washing downstream, and kept farmers on their land rather than expelling them to infant suburbs to work in factories.¹⁹⁵ There was only one major drawback — it provided little water storage for cities wanting to grow.¹⁹⁶

Ironically, Waco's Bob Poage — Laneport's only big booster in Congress — authored the 1952 legislation that launched the “little” dams movement. To farmers, Poage was a hero — the “father” of the only legislation that could stop the Army from covering the nation's most fertile river valleys with lakes. Urban interests, fearing destructive floods and needing water, favored the big dam approach, and fell under the sway of the Corps of Engineers. Poage, who had studied geology at Baylor University and had a strong grasp of flood engineering, explained the beauty of the small dams approach:

Water that soaks into the ground where it falls is an unmixed blessing. It does no one any harm and may do good for many people. It is water that falls and does not sink into the ground that does the damage . . . I think that we have had our attention focussed entirely too closely on the debris-littered torrents pouring down the main stems of our big rivers, and in profitless debate on how to handle

¹⁹⁵An echo of England's enclosure movement, which stripped yeoman farmers of their common lands and forced them to take factory jobs.

¹⁹⁶Elmer T. Peterson, “Big-Dam Foolishness,” *Country Gentleman*, May, 1952, 26-27, 74-75

that much water — how to *control* floods. We have forgotten, apparently, that somewhere back upstream almost every yellow gallon of that boiling flood came out of a tiny branch that any fairly active coon-dog could jump across. Keeping the water back up there in that branch, or persuading it to sink into the ground before it even reaches the branch, is flood prevention . . . ¹⁹⁷

House Resolution 7868 contained serious faults in terms of practicality for farmers who wanted to wanted to form watershed districts, but Poage, chairman of the Agriculture Committee's flood prevention subcommittee, believed it better to get something than nothing. He feared that the Army's congressional cheerleaders might kill the small dams legislation if it threatened the Corps' turf. The chief problem with Poage's bill, a Soil Conservation Service official wrote, was that limitations on watershed size and on the volume of impounded water a "small" dam could contain were "so low that it would be a serious handicap to reaching the objective . . . if it did not make it impossible."¹⁹⁸ Poage agreed. "Most of the Committee realized the force of your argument, but all of us finally agreed that from a practical standpoint, of getting the bill passed, we better keep the figures low I am frankly afraid to undertake to . . . raise these limits . . . because I anticipate that the Public Works Committee is going to be very jealous of us . . . and would, in all

¹⁹⁷Press Release, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Agriculture, May 15, 1952, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹⁸Letter, Louis P. Merrill to Poage, May 16, 1952, Box 443, File 2, Poage Papers. The SCS was part of the Department of Agriculture.

probability . . . prejudice the House against us.”¹⁹⁹ And so the Department of Agriculture gained the ability, albeit a limited one, to plan and construct networks of “little” dams to prevent flooding and conserve fertile cultivated soil.

In Williamson County, Poage had many admirers, including newspaperman Henry B. Fox, who in 1952 considered him something of a hero. Poage had a firm grasp of agricultural issues and he truly cared about farmers. He didn’t represent Williamson County; indeed, his responsibility to Milam County voters made him favor Laneport dam, which would give Milam the ultimate in flood protection. But after their election to Congress in 1937, Poage had worked closely with Lyndon Johnson, and now with Congressman Thornberry, because Blackland Prairie farmers faced similar problems wherever they plowed in the Brazos Valley.

Williamson County made a perfect test site for Poage’s small dams program. Brazos River District and Army engineers had proved that most of the flood waters that periodically piled up across the lowlands of eastern Williamson and western Milam counties came from the San Gabriel’s tributaries — not from its main stem. While shutting down the main stem during a flood would certainly help matters, checking overflows on Brushy, Pecan, Willis, Donahoe and Berry creeks was just as important.

¹⁹⁹Letter, Poage to Merrill, May 31, 1952, *ibid.*

The county's chief economic engine — the farmers — generally favored the “little” dams idea, because they believed a carefully designed system of small dams would eliminate the need for Laneport dam. The Czechs who owned so much of the county's Blackland Prairie were conservative politically, but progressive farmers, employing the latest agricultural methods and investing heavily in their land. With Laneport, they faced dispossession of their precious Black Waxy, their agricultural livelihoods, their homes and gardens, social and religious lives. To them, the small dams program seemed a godsend. But though they penned hundreds of letters to their elected representatives, no one in Washington seemed to heed them. No leader rose to capture the attention of the Washington power brokers. At least, not until Henry B. Fox got interested in “little” dams and flood prevention.

Henry Fox grew up in Granger when it was a robust market town, the third most important city in Williamson County. He was the youngest of seven children in a prominent banking family. In the Twenties and Thirties, Granger Czechs clustered together on the west side of the railroad tracks and the “Americanos” lived on



Figure 17: W.R. "Bob" Poage

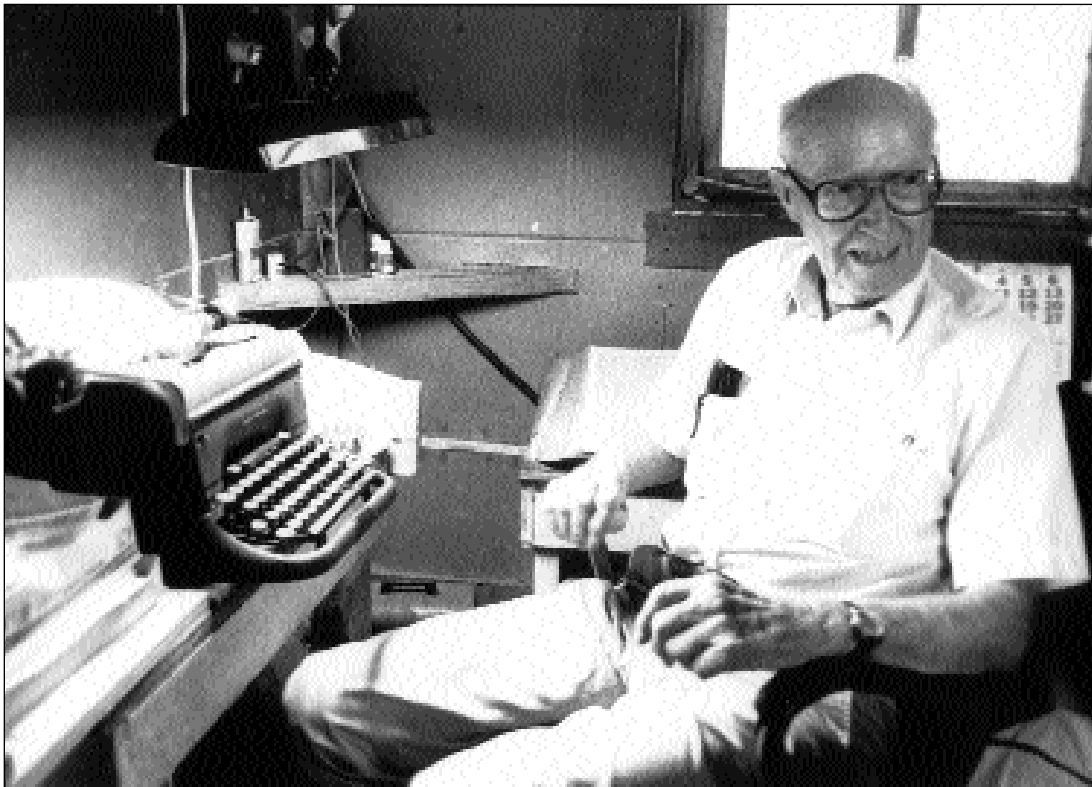


Figure 18: Henry Fox, the "Circleville philosopher," sits in his smoke shed sanctuary.

“their” side of town, each group avoiding social and business encounters with the other.²⁰⁰ But Henry, as “Americano” as they came, felt at ease with Czechs. He probably picked it up from his father, John Short Fox, who for many years ran the Czech-owned Granger National Bank.

Henry’s father, John Short Fox, was a classic American success story. Leaving Lynchburg, Tennessee, after finishing the sixth grade, he rode the train west, carrying a Colt 45 and a nickel in his pocket. On January 1, 1893, he disembarked in Taylor, where he needed to earn money to eat. There he swept floors at a lumber yard and worked his way to the top of the business. He started a competing lumber yard in Granger, went into banking and lived in a fine house at the intersection of Fox and Gabriel streets with his wife “Fanny and their brood. He was a county school trustee and served on the boards of Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District and Southwestern University in Georgetown, which gave him an honorary Doctorate of Law. He required that every one of his seven children attend college there. Upon his death in 1944, each child received a gift of three hundred acres of prime bottom land along the San Gabriel River. But under the terms of the bequest, the land could not be sold. “That’s why the kids are all scattered up and down

²⁰⁰Interview: Betty Hajda, Feb. 28, 2001, Granger

that river. He had a long reach,” a grandson said. “He was a powerful person, very much the autocrat.”²⁰¹

Wilson H. Fox was John Short’s eldest child. After serving two terms in the Texas Legislature, Wilson practiced law in Taylor and ran the county’s Democratic Party machine for more than two decades. Most people considered him a brilliant behind-the-scenes operator.²⁰² Robert Bryan Fox, another son, was a gifted orator, taught history and math and became superintendent of schools in Czech-dominated Friendship.²⁰³ In college, a third son, John Howard Fox, majored in philosophy and psychology but moved to Hearne to manage the South Texas Cottonseed Oil Company. In 1947, Governor Beauford H. Jester appointed him a director of the Brazos River Authority, over which he presided from 1959 through 1963.²⁰⁴ J.S. Fox’s fourth son, Walter, edited *The Bartlett Tribune* but died in 1940 of a heart attack at the age of 31.²⁰⁵ One daughter, Frances Fox Smither, married a wealthy Huntsville man and raised two children.²⁰⁶ The other, Mary Elizabeth Fox covered the United Nations as a journalist, then

²⁰¹Interviews: Paul Fox, Aug. 31, 2000, Austin; Dr. Jim Fox, Sept. 6, 2000, Austin; Geraldine Fox, Sept. 20, 2000, Granger; “Granger Banker Is Honored By Southwestern U,” *Taylor Times*, June 7, 1940; Hendrickson, viii

²⁰²“Wilson H. Fox Services Today,” *Austin American-Statesman*, Feb. 11, 1974, Center for American History, Austin

²⁰³Interviews: Geraldine Fox and Paul Fox, *ibid.*

²⁰⁴“J. Howard Fox Biographical Material”; “Salvation From Seed,” *Houston Chronicle Rotogravure Magazine*, Sept. 22, 1957, Box 59, Brazos River Authority

²⁰⁵Interview: Geraldine Fox, *ibid.*; Telegram, Jno A. Norris to J.S. Fox, Nov. 1, 1937, Box 59, Brazos River Authority

²⁰⁶Interview: Marie Fox, Feb. 26, 2001, Circleville

returned to Southwestern to write a master's thesis on Texas roads and direct publicity.²⁰⁷

Henry rebelled. The family fondly regarded him as a budding Bolshevik. "I graduated from Southwestern at eleven in the morning, and I caught a train at twelve for New York . . . [But] all I saw up there were writers trying to get rich enough to buy a house and move to the country. I saw a shortcut and figured, why not move to the country and to hell with getting rich?"²⁰⁸ After a year in Greenwich Village, he returned to Texas, edited several country newspapers, moved to his three hundred acres at Circleville, and wrote a folksy humor column for *Colliers*. When the magazine folded, he syndicated "The Circleville Philosopher" to about fifty newspapers with one million readers.²⁰⁹ Like Mark Twain and Will Rogers, to whom he was frequently compared, Henry Fox had an uncanny knack for exposing human foolishness, especially of the political variety. (As a young newspaper editor, he had run up against an East Texas congressman who had put every member of his family on the

²⁰⁷Biography, Mary Elizabeth Fox, *Austin American Statesman* morgue, Oct. 1, 1961

²⁰⁸"Book by H.B. Fox 'bamboozles' establishment in small town," *Texas Press Messenger*, April 1975; Rick Smith, "Writer-philosopher took shortcut to beat rat race," *Austin American-Statesman*, March 5, 1979; "H.B. Fox Writes Feisty, Folksy Humor," *Daily Texan*, Oct. 16, 1975, Center for American History

²⁰⁹Kent Biffle, "The sly old Fox," *Dallas Morning News*, April 28, 1984, Center for American History.

federal payroll, to Fox's disgust. Afterwards he disliked politicians, period, with the possible exception of Poage.)²¹⁰

At heart his philosophy was a sort of gentrified populism, one that Thomas Jefferson might have recognized. In Fox's ideal world, small town life based on agrarian values far surpassed the urban-industrial model for a civilized democratic society. "The nice thing about ranching" he would opine, "is you can ride around looking for cattle and call it work."²¹¹ Or, as he quipped on the "Today" show, "In New York City, you have problems and no answers. In Circleville, we have answers and no problems."²¹² The Army engineers got their first taste of Fox's pugilistic wit in 1949 after they released the first map of Laneport dam. He ran a page-dominant advertisement signed by sixty-eight citizens in his newspaper, *The Granger News*, starting with this question:

IS THIS A GOOD THING?

Take a copy of the map of the proposed Laneport Dam reservoir. Notice where the maximum waterline would be. It would include all land not higher than 530 feet above sea level. This would include an area extending from a point on the San Gabriel River south of Granger almost to the town of Granger itself, would even take in areas NORTH of Granger, would include Friendship.

²¹⁰Letter, John Short Fox to Johnson, Sept. 19, 1942, House Papers, Box 144, LBJ Library

²¹¹Jay Jorden, "Circleville philosopher works 'gentle fraud'," Associated Press, *Sherman Democrat*, July 31, 1988, 1, Center for American History

²¹²Interview: Betty Zimmerhanel, Dec. 8, 2000, Circleville

In short, it would cause the government to buy practically ALL the land east of Granger . . . up to the Laneport Dam.

This land is now producing . . . about

ONE MILLION DOLLARS A YEAR

This would be revenue which Granger would lose, as Granger is the primary beneficiary from this area. It would take the sale of a powerful lot of fish hooks and tackle to off-set such a loss.

Over a full-page reproduction of the Army's map ran the headline, "Official Army Engineer's [sic] Map of Laneport Dam — Guaranteed to Baffle You." Underneath the map, which brings to mind a Rorschach test, is this caption:

If you can tell anything about it, here's the map of the proposed Laneport Lake. It's a little hard to figure out, but if you study it long enough and look closely enough you can get some idea of where the shoreline might be, a few minutes before you go crazy. The best way to understand it is to spread the Granger News out in front of you, with the top of this page pointing toward north. Then the Laneport dam will be east of you, or to your right, and you'll be at the south side of the San Gabriel River, looking at the project and wondering whose land is going to get covered up²¹³

²¹³Advertisement, "IS THIS A GOOD THING?" and map, "Official Army Engineer's Map of Laneport Dam — Guaranteed to Baffle You," *The Granger News*, circa January 1949, House Papers, Box 314, LBJ Library

Henry Fox could not stop joking, even when he was dead serious. He was almost pathologically shy, but did not care what most people thought of him. He was tailor-made to take on an unpopular dam using a program of “little” dams sprinkled across Williamson County as an economic, small-scale alternative to a big, unpopular Laneport dam.

While putting out Granger’s newspaper, Henry Fox had “connected” with Czech businessmen who controlled most commerce in that town. Having planted cotton and pecan trees on his river “bottom” property, he empathized with the Czech families who would lose their farms in Friendship, Machu and Moravia — communities they had created and nurtured — because a dam designed to stop floods elsewhere would permanently flood *them*. To the Czechs it seemed that the Army engineers, the agency of their forced expulsion, was as ruthless to them as the Hapsburgs had been to their forebears.²¹⁴

The Czechs had been vigorously arguing their case against Laneport since 1948 but they had gotten nowhere. They tried Lyndon Johnson and they tried Homer Thornberry, but the person they turned to most plaintively was Bob Poage. Poage would understand their plight, they thought — all his senses were tuned to agriculture. The Laneport plan affronted common sense, they argued. The remarkable soils of the Black Waxy needed protection, not obliteration. Laneport would destroy the most

²¹⁴Interview: Paul Fox, *ibid*.

productive non-irrigated agricultural land in Texas; alternatively, flood-control dams could be built on the poor chalk soil west of Georgetown. The Czech farmers could not comprehend the dimwittedness of supposedly smart, “scientific” Army engineers who failed to factor into their cost-effective formulas the economic wealth created by their farms. Comparing *their* soils near Laneport (“rich loam soil of fabulous production”) with those of Milam (“sandy lands”) and western Williamson County (“chalk rock hills”), Czech protestors expressed stunned disbelief that the cultivated Black Waxy should be considered expendable. They were, of course, entirely correct on the matter of soils. The widow of a revered Czech clergyman pleaded with Poage,

. . . It is inconceivable to me . . . that such a program . . . would actually be carried out. Texas has vast areas of poor, sandy and submarginal lands and only a relatively smaller percent is highly productive soil. This land in Granger falls into this class . . . Milam County just below the proposed dam site is inferior sandy, clay soil, that is why it is inconceivable that the good rich land should be sacrificed when only a few miles down the road, the dam could be placed on poor soil — or placed above Georgetown where only 4 families would be displaced in place of the 135 families in the Laneport area — an indication in itself that this must be very productive land.²¹⁵

Mrs. Hegar and a Friendship farm wife, Stacy Labaj, tried to interest Poage in Laneport’s cost to the Czech culture — but very

²¹⁵Letter, Mrs. Joseph Hegar to Poage, Nov. 23, 1954, Box 629, File 3, Poage Papers

gingerly. They emphasized how well the Czech communities measured up against mainstream America, not their uniquely Czech qualities. In 1954, the year of *Brown v. Board of Education*, America was moving toward integration of ethnic and racial groups — not toward encouraging diversity. If Friendship was to be sacrificed, Labaj wanted Poage to understand what it was. She wrote about its culture, its quality as a society, but not about its *Czechness*:

We . . . send our sons and our daughters to universities, to specialized training schools; we take pride in . . . our way of life. We are a community which is organized with a Home Demonstration Club, Mothers' Club, an active Farm Bureau chapter and we have a dividend paying cooperative gin; we have a school of three large buildings . . . and an active church. All these things would be wiped out.²¹⁶

Poage did not get the message. "I think that you probably have not realized that if the Lanesport [sic] Dam were built, and you were required to sell your property that it would not be confiscated," he wrote. "On the contrary, you would be paid for everything the Government takes." Labaj wrote back,

I regret but feel urged to say you seem not to realize that the passage of the Laneport Dam project is like snuffing out our lives Ours is really a very fine, modern, active community . . . We are not a backward group and we know

²¹⁶Letter, Mrs. Henry A. Labaj to Poage, Aug. 10, 1954, Box 629, File 3, Poage Papers

our heritage is worth fighting for and we feel it is the height of poor planning to snatch out of production fine cultivated land such as these 135 farms.²¹⁷

These were powerful pleas, but the Czechs lacked leaders who knew how to grab headlines and apply pressure on politicians. Henry Fox knew how. He loathed the Laneport plan and felt that the San Gabriel River should be controlled upstream, where it would help Williamson County farmers. That put him and his brother, Bryan, on a collision course with their older brother Wilson. Howard, a director of the Brazos River Authority, was left in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between his brothers while steering his water agency toward solvency.

Williamson County's "little dams" movement started in 1954 when the Little River-San Gabriel Soil Conservation District launched a drive to establish an "upstream flood prevention project" on the San Gabriel watershed above Georgetown. As its directors announced their goal, they also called for "re-consideration" of the proposed Laneport site. Like most people in Williamson County, the district's directors assumed that a new

²¹⁷Letter, Labaj to Poage, Nov. 3, 1954, *ibid.*

Army survey would recommend dams west of Georgetown “with supporting adequate upstream flood prevention treatment.” If the Army *had* to dam Laneport, surely a smaller dam would do the job, backed by a network of “little” dams.²¹⁸ In Georgetown, Bartlett, and Taylor, organizers called “mass meetings” that resulted in petitions, resolutions and scores of personal letters posted to Washington.²¹⁹

It was a tedious business, establishing water improvement districts under convoluted Department of Agriculture rules, but local farmers and ranchers, led by Henry Fox, made steady progress. In 1956 Congress approved start-up monies and the State of Texas approved Brushy Creek and San Gabriel River water improvement districts.²²⁰ Fox had been elected president of the San Gabriel Water Control and Improvement District. His board of directors included A.C. “Doc” Weir and Donald Irvine of Georgetown, C.V. Hutto of Bertram and Henry Labaj of Granger. On January 14, 1958, the district called an election and passed a

²¹⁸Letter, Albert Steglich to Poage, July 26, 1954, Box 692, File 3, Poage Papers

²¹⁹Resolution, Citizens of Williamson County, July 29, 1954, Georgetown; Letters, Louis P.Vitek to Collins, Aug. 1, 1954; Bartlett Home Demonstration Club to Collins, Aug. 11, 1954, Box 59, Brazos River Authority; Mrs. Henry A. Labaj to Poage, Aug. 10, 1954; Labaj to Poage, Nov. 5, 1954, Box 692, File 3, Poage Papers; Clarence M Barnes and 309 others to Senators Johnson and Price Daniel, etc., Sept. 30, 1954, Box 59, BRA

²²⁰“Brushy Creek Watershed Is Approved By Budget Director,” *Taylor Daily Press*, April 23, 1956; “SCS Approves San Gabriel Watersheds,” *Taylor Daily Press*, May 9, 1956; Letters, Henry Fox to Poage, Feb. 9, 1957, Box 629, File 3, Poage Papers; Poage to A.C. Weir, May 4, 1957, *ibid.*

\$140,000 bond to pay the local share of a five million dollar federal “little dams” flood prevention project for the upper San Gabriel River. The popular vote was overwhelming — four to one in favor.²²¹

The Army halted work in the San Gabriel Valley. With Laneport mired in controversy and the small dams program moving forward at a brisk clip, Thornberry knew Congress would not fund the big dam project. From his point of view, the beauty of the resurvey being put “on hold” was that it gave him political “cover” with Owen Sherrill and Wilson Fox — the most outspoken cheerleaders for and against Laneport — while protecting Czech farm families and the Granger business community. He hinted at this in a letter to a Georgetown newspaper publisher. “I have been caught in a dilemma in that I am very anxious to have the report expedited and yet, at the same time, would not want any undue impatience on my part to cause the Engineers not to bring out a recommendation with which all of us would be happy,” he cautioned.²²² Whether Thornberry deliberately delayed the resurvey, or whether he simply allowed events to evolve, the net

²²¹“Bond Vote on Small Dams Slated Tuesday, Jan. 14th,” Jan. 8, 1958; “San Gabriel Voters Approve \$140,000 Small Dams Bond,” Jan. 16, 1958, *Williamson County Sun*. Voters in Milam and Burnet counties, which contained a few miles of the San Gabriel watershed, concurred.

²²²Letter, Cong. Homer Thornberry to Don Scarbrough, July 20, 1961, Don Scarbrough Papers, Georgetown

effect was that Laneport was dead. So, too, of course, were the dams at Georgetown.²²³

It was a situation filled with irony. Williamson County residents — especially the Black Waxy's Czechs, Owen Sherrill and Henry Fox — had effectively blocked Laneport dam but didn't quite realize it. Poage laid it out for a flustered Taylor correspondent:

I have never understood the Taylor attitude, but there has been a great deal of objection to the Lanesport [sic] site out of Taylor. The situation is such that Congressman Thornberry could not be expected to urge the Lanesport [sic] site. He was, in effect, forced to take some kind of action against this site. Obviously, with the Congressman from the area where the dam was to be built opposing it, we had little chance of getting the dam when there were plenty of other dam sites where everybody was in agreement.²²⁴

With one of the few Milam County residents who ever wrote Poage about Laneport, Poage was quite candid. "We have to get along with the Williamson County people; else, we are not going to get any dam at all," he wrote. "They may not be able to get just what they want constructed, but they can certainly block the construction of anything that a large part of them don't want."²²⁵

²²³There is no hard evidence to support this theory, alas, because Homer Thornberry's congressional papers are not available to researchers. But from what Poage and Thornberry did write on the subject, I am confident this was the case.

²²⁴Letter, Poage to Dr. Edmond Doak, Sept. 5, 1958, Box 692, File 4, Poage Papers

²²⁵Letter, Poage to Emory B. Camp, Sept. 17, 1958, Box 692, Poage Papers

Williamson County residents didn't *just* want to kill Laneport, they wanted dams west of Georgetown *and* fifty or more "little" dams on the river's creeks and branches. And they were absolutely convinced that an Army resurvey would recommend precisely that. So the forces favoring dams at Georgetown cranked up the heat on the Army to start resurveying again. The Brazos River Authority backed the effort, fearing it would lose future water sales to the Lower Colorado River Authority if a dam at Georgetown did not get built.²²⁶ Business leaders from Georgetown, Granger and Taylor staged a well-rehearsed "unity meeting" on March 19, 1958, to demonstrate the county's common cause in supporting a resurvey.²²⁷

The problem was that "resurvey" meant different things to different people. No one knows what Congressman Thornberry thought: he kept the resurvey alive but couldn't keep the Army working at it. The "little dams" people, Henry Fox and the farmers and ranchers of Williamson County, thought it would strengthen

²²⁶Letters, Raymond Holubec to Collins, Feb. 11, 1958; Collins to Holubec Feb. 16, 1958; McCall to Collins, Feb. 24, 1958, Box 59, BRA

²²⁷"Citizens Agree on Two Dams Above Georgetown, Small One At Laneport," *Taylor Daily Press*, March 5, 1958; Statement by R.D. Collins, BRA manager, at Corps of Engineers hearing, March 19, 1958, Box 59, BRA

their fifty-dam program, so they backed the resurvey. Wilson Fox and Bob Poage thought the resurvey would favor Laneport dam, so they backed it. Most Williamson County residents thought a resurvey would, as one newspaper confidently predicted, “find that dams above Georgetown will provide maximum protection and benefits to Williamson County and the areas below this county, Milam County in particular.”²²⁸ So they backed it, too.

After the “unity meeting,” the Army resumed work in the San Gabriel Valley, investigating four possible reservoir sites — Laneport, North Fork, South Fork and Berry Creek. The “little” dams project was put into deep freeze. “It’s impossible to intelligently plan small dams until the location of any big dams is decided, due to the fact [that] some of the proposed small dams would be . . . covered up by water held back by the big dams. Consequently, we have to wait,” Henry Fox’s San Gabriel River Water Control and Improvement District announced.²²⁹

In July of 1960, the Army’s chief engineer in Ft. Worth informed Poage and Brazos River Authority officials that it would recommend two reservoirs, one at Laneport and one on the North Fork of the San Gabriel River.²³⁰ But no official report emerged. A year later, Texas’ State Board of Water Engineers released a

²²⁸“County-wide ‘Unity’ Meet On Gabriel Dams Set Here,” *Williamson County Sun*, Feb. 13, 1958

²²⁹“San Gabriel Dams Plans Postponed,” Jan. 27, 1959; “San Gabriel Water Taxes Killed for ‘61,” March 30, 1960, *Taylor Daily Press*

²³⁰Letter, Colonel R.P. West to Poage, July 25, 1960, Box 692, File 4, Poage Papers

twenty-year plan for developing water resources, recommending that a dam be built on the North Fork of the San Gabriel River and conspicuously omitting Laneport as a prospective dam site.²³¹ Still the Army remained mum about its plans.

On October 15, 1961, Henry Fox lost patience. In Texas, water improvement districts had to “start action” within ten years of their creation, or automatically die, he wrote in a newspaper article. The San Gabriel WCID’s life span was nearly half spent. “We would have been long gone on the job if the monkey-wrench of big dams had not been thrown,” Fox said. “For two years the project has stood still, waiting for the Army Engineers to make up their minds . . . Time is running out . . . The question is, shall we sit around hoping for some fabulous big dams costing unbelievably large sums, or shall we take hold of the small dam project now within our reach?”²³²

Eighteen days later, Army engineers came clean. In a report dated November 3, 1961, the Army recommended a three-dam package: one at Laneport and two on the forks of the San Gabriel River west of Georgetown. Laneport would be fifteen percent larger than originally planned and it would be built immediately. The Georgetown dams should be built “as second and third units,

²³¹“North San Gabriel Dam Site Gets Boost By State Board,” *Williamson County Sun*, Aug. 3, 1961

²³²Henry Fox, “Small Dam Program Urged as Means to Cover Wide Range Water Needs,” *Taylor Daily Press*, Oct. 15, 1961

respectively, at such times that additional water conservation storage is needed.”²³³

Williamson County threw a tantrum. A Taylor delegation composed of bank presidents and directors of the enormous and influential Taylor Bedding Company, Williamson County Farm Bureau, Williamson County Pecan Growers Association and South Texas Cotton Oil Company angrily protested the Army’s conclusions with Congressman Thornberry in Austin. Thornberry was shaken by the encounter. “Frankly,” he told his visitors, “I wish I had never heard of the Laneport dam. It has caused me more concern than any other one thing in my district.”²³⁴ People working for the Georgetown dams were livid. “The Laneport dam will be larger than contemplated fourteen years ago and the dams above Georgetown will be built after the Laneport dam has been completed, and then only at the discretion of the Army Engineers. So, it would seem, not much progress has been made in those hard 14 years of work and worry,” the *Williamson County Sun* editorialized.²³⁵ Henry Fox described the larger Laneport lake to Granger residents:

²³³“Notice of Review of Reports on Brazos River and Tributaries, Texas, Covering San Gabriel River Watershed,” U.S. Army Engineer Division, Southwestern Corps of Engineers, Nov. 3, 1961, *Taylor Daily Press* Library, Taylor

²³⁴“Taylor Group Opposes Dam At Laneport,” *Taylor Daily Press*, Nov. 7, 1961

²³⁵“No Dams Above Georgetown — Yet”, *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 9, 1961

During a San Gabriel River flood, [it would] back water up to the edge of Granger; and all the way up the river over the bottom lands to the Old Georgetown Road bridge . . . drowning out the pecan trees, covering up the farm land, the roads etc. Then . . . after authorities . . . ruled it was safe, the water would be drained off and the ‘lake’ returned to its small size, leaving a vast mud hole in what is now productive, tax-paying land.”

He asked readers to get behind the small dams project, “which is ready to go if the big dam can be stopped.”²³⁶

In an odd twist that further inflamed Williamson County residents, Congressman Poage publicly attacked its citizens for breaking their “word” that they would abide by the results of the Army resurvey. He was referring to Owen W. Sherrill, but he sowed his accusations broadly. He started with a heated letter addressed to his small dams disciple, Henry Fox, which he released to the Taylor paper without Fox’s knowledge. Poage wrote,

I did agree, and many of your representative citizens of Williamson County agreed, that they would abide by this decision. I am frankly surprised, embarrassed, and a little perturbed to find that some of the very people who asked me . . . to stand aside these long years . . . to now be petitioning for a repudiation of that agreement . . . You had your day in court. You had your appeal . . . You lost on the engineering facts as they were understood by the Corps of Engineers.²³⁷

²³⁶Letter to Editor, Henry Fox, *Granger News*, Nov. 16, 1961

²³⁷Letter, Poage to Henry Fox, Dec. 8, 1961, Box 692, File 4, Poage Papers

Fox replied a few days later in a letter to the editor of the Taylor *Daily Press*:

Since you published a letter from Cong. W.R. Poage to me, under this new system whereby Congressmen write individuals and send carbon copies to the newspapers, I would like to reverse the process. I am writing you a letter and will send a carbon copy to Mr. Poage. I would like to comment further on Mr. Poage's original letter, a copy of which got to you before the original got to me

I am intrigued with this new theory of government, whereby the people are considered unfair if they fail to back up one Congressman's promise to another Congressman, involving the people's own welfare. It's a fine theory, especially for Congressmen, but that's not the way democracy works. A Congressman can commit himself to a course of action if he wants to, but Mr. Poage is the first Congressman I ever heard of claiming the people are obliged to follow, whether they want to or not.

. . . Mr. Poage wrote: "You had your day in court . . ." This too is an intriguing new thought, that the Army Engineers constitute the people's court, and when they speak, the people must keep quiet and submit²³⁸

By the time the correspondence ended, four sets of increasingly harsh letters had been exchanged and reprinted in Williamson, Milam, Bell and McLennan county newspapers and Poage looked embattled and foolish. In Poage's final letter, which he promised not to send to the newspapers, he asked Henry Fox an extraordinary question:

²³⁸Letter, Henry Fox to Poage, Dec. 12, 1961, *ibid*.

In all fairness, and as man to man, what would you do if you were in my place? (Frankly, if I were in your place, I might do exactly what you are doing, but you will note I have not criticized you for doing it. You live in Williamson County. I think you own land in the Laneport basin. I don't blame you for trying to protect your interests. Is it fair for you to blame me for trying to protect the people I represent?). I will appreciate it if you will write me one more letter and frankly state what you think I, as the Representative of Milam County, should do.²³⁹

Fox complied. "I think the quickest and fairest way for all the people in the San Gabriel River watershed to get flood protection is through the Soil Conservation Service route of 59 flood-retention dams," he wrote. "This would require an about-face on the big dam proposition, to the extent of informing the Board for Rivers and Harbors that opposition to a Laneport dam is so great that delay in building it may go on for years and therefore the plans should be abandoned . . . I pledge you my written word that we will be in Red Smith's [SCS] office in Temple the day after the big dam at Laneport is disapproved, initiating immediate action. Everything is in shape to do this."²⁴⁰

It could not happen. Poage couldn't do an "about-face" on Laneport. It would have been political suicide, pleasing Williamson County where no one could vote for him there and betraying promises he had made his own constituents in Milam

²³⁹Letter, Poage to Henry Fox, Dec. 19, 1961, *ibid.*

²⁴⁰Letter, Henry Fox to Poage, Dec. 20, 1961, *ibid.*

County. Still, one wonders whether Poage might have been tempted by Fox's advice. After all, he had crafted the small dams legislation that might have saved Williamson County a great deal of pain.

The day after Thanksgiving 1961, Henry Fox and his allies dropped off petitions at banks across the county. They had one week to collect names to meet the deadline for the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, which would rule in January on the Army's proposal for the San Gabriel River. The petition urged that the Army's Laneport dam proposal be killed, and that it be replaced by small dams on the upper reaches of the San Gabriel River and its tributaries.

Nearly three thousand people signed the petition out of Williamson County's thirty-five thousand population. If the county had ten thousand registered voters, as is probable, the small dams movement had captured one-third of Williamson County's electorate in one week.²⁴¹ It was an impressive piece of grass-roots democracy. Petitioners came from every part of the

²⁴¹The estimate is conservative, based on average family size and the poll tax's impact on the county's poor, particularly Mexican-American and Afro-American residents, few of whom could afford to vote.

county except Round Rock, which was not directly affected. Granger signatures covered twelve of the petition's forty pages. Georgetown residents signed ten pages. Taylor contributed almost as many petitioners, with eight pages, followed by Bartlett, two pages, Liberty Hill and Florence, two each, and Jarrell, one. Burnet County residents, mostly from Bertram, added four pages to the petition. One page consisted of petitioners from all over the county. Attached to the official petition were letters from the Williamson County Farm Bureau, representing thirteen hundred farm families, and half a dozen individuals. It was signed by every banker in Taylor, Granger, Georgetown, Bartlett, Florence, Walburg, Schwertner and Bertram.²⁴²

It was not enough. Thornberry and Poage, who had pledged to support the Army's findings, no matter how the resurvey came out, held their positions. Vice President Johnson did not intervene. On January 24, 1962, the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors approved the Army's work.²⁴³ A big Laneport dam would be built. Georgetown's dams would wait, probably forever. And the "little" dams program for the San Gabriel Valley —

²⁴²"Nearly 3,000 Protest Dam At Laneport, Request Small Upstream Structures Instead," *Williamson County Sun*, Dec. 14, 1961

²⁴³Letter, Major General William F. Cassidy to Vice President Johnson, Dec. 18, 1961, VP Papers, Public Works, San Gabriel File, Box 115, LBJ Library; "Laneport Project Authorization Is Recommended," *Taylor Daily Press*, Jan. 28, 1962; "Dam At Laneport Is Recommended . . . in spite of Homer, H---, & High water," *Williamson County Sun*, Feb. 1, 1962

Congressman Poage's legislative "baby" — was dead, largely by his own hand.

6

Hilda's Bottom

At around five o'clock on October 4, 1962, a long line of buses and limousines rolled through Circleville, heading for Wilson Fox's Riverside Ranch and the premiere stag social affair of Central Texas.²⁴⁴ The limos carried big-shot politicians and small (though Vice President Lyndon Johnson couldn't make it), while buses from Austin, Dripping Springs, Lockhart, Luling, Brenham, Marble Falls, Burnet, Johnson City, Blanco, Giddings, Bastrop, Smithville and Lexington ferried Democratic faithful from across the Tenth Congressional District's ten counties.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴Dave Shanks, "Thornberry Barbecue," Sept. 28, 1963, unedited reporter's copy, *Austin American Statesman* morgue

²⁴⁵Robert A. Caro, *Path to Power* (1983) Vintage Books, New York, 391

Party-goers were in high spirits, salivating at the thought of Fox's and Roman Bartosh's celebrated barbecue blowouts honoring Congressman Homer Thornberry.

The party, which Wilson Fox had launched in 1949 after Thornberry's first election to Congress, took place every other year at Hilda's Bottom (naughtily named for Wilson's wife Hilda), where scores of burr oak towered over a manicured glade that ended abruptly at a cliff forty feet above the San Gabriel River. At Thornberry's stag barbecues, Hilda's Bottom resembled Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Amber electric bulbs strung through the treetops brushed revellers with Vermeer's golden light. The crowd was giddy: crops were in, bank notes paid off and an election was on its way. Taylor Meat Company owners Van, Joe, Charlie and Paul Zimmerhanel flipped one-pound T-bone steaks on a massive stone barbecue pit built into the embankment overhanging the river while twenty black men, crisply dressed in red bow ties, starched white shirts and black pants, circulated through the crowd, pitchers of beer in each fist, pouring constantly. Their job was to keep all glasses full.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶Interview, Dr. James Fox, Sept. 6, 2000. Fox is Wilson Fox's only son and attended many of his father's Riverside Ranch barbecues.



Figure 19: Wilson Fox



Figure 20: Homer Thornberry

It was a cheap ticket — two dollars for “the biggest steak in Texas” and all the beer you could drink — and an absolutely “must-do” event.²⁴⁷ “All the politicians were there,” reminisced a former Georgetown postmaster who never drank a drop of spirit. “If you wanted to climb, you went. Our office turned out in force. It was always a lot of fun, with a lot of politicking. And a lot of foolishness.”²⁴⁸

In 1962, fifteen hundred men — a record — were pumping Congressman Thornberry’s hand, eager to jawbone with one of Vice President Lyndon Johnson’s closest friends.²⁴⁹ Many did not know that Thornberry was a key man in the House of Representatives, a ranking member of the powerful Rules Committee, which set the terms of engagement for all proposed legislation. For years, Thornberry had been the “bridge” between

²⁴⁷Interview: Congressman J.J. “Jake” Pickle, April 18, 2000, Austin. The ticket price rose to \$5 before the barbecues ended. The last one was held in 1973 for Congressman Pickle. Soon afterwards, Wilson Fox switched to the Republican Party, protesting against an activist and liberal national Democratic Party. He died suddenly of a heart attack on February 10, 1974.

²⁴⁸Interview: J.D. Thomas, Jr., Sept. 8, 2000, Georgetown

²⁴⁹The closeness of their relationship was underscored by the concern Senator Johnson showed when Thornberry underwent gallstone surgery. “For some time I have been worried about your very hectic social life and fearful that the consequences would not be good,” Johnson wrote. “Too many ambassadors, too much horse racing, too many health roll calls always exact their price. I’ll see you Sunday and tell you just how to handle your business. Love, Lyndon.” Senate Papers, Selected Names-Thornberry, July 2, 1957, LBJ Library

Speaker Sam Rayburn and Johnson. “Everything flowed through him,” said Congressman J.J. “Jake” Pickle of his predecessor.²⁵⁰

Thornberry had coasted to victory in 1960, but the coming election was, in Pickle’s words, a “death-lock race” with the dams as its centerpiece. Since the previous year, when the Army’s resurvey had determined on Laneport dam, Thornberry had heard nothing but anguished cries from Williamson County, until now a “safe” voting bloc for him. He had seen the typed, single-spaced, inch-thick petition signed by three thousand voters against Laneport; he had talked with every banker and business leader in Taylor, Georgetown and Granger and found them appalled by the Army’s plans; now the State of Texas had come out against Laneport.

Not surprisingly, the Republicans were mounting a serious challenge to Thornberry, backing a golden-tongued radio commentator named Jim Dobbs. Dobbs was a Church of Christ minister with violently negative opinions about the big government policies of President John Kennedy — and by extension, Vice President Johnson and his old friend, Thornberry.²⁵¹

Thornberry should have been elated about his reception at Riverside Ranch that evening. Congress had been keeping him

²⁵⁰Interviews: Pickle, July 3, 1998, and April 18, 2000, Austin; “Senate Nod Tribute To Texan Homer Thornberry,” *Austin American*, July 16, 1963, 4

²⁵¹Interview: Pickle, April 18, 2000

busy, too busy to spend much time “working” his district. And though he was the most convivial of mortals, Thornberry lacked the stomach for the bitter harangues he had come to expect from opponents of Laneport dam, who seemed to lurk behind every tree in Williamson County. Secretly, he dreaded politicking. There was a fundamental shyness, a reserve, about Thornberry that emanated, perhaps, from his growing up the son of two deaf mute teachers, having to master signing as well as English to communicate.²⁵² Wilson Fox’s barbecue and the money it raised to keep him in office was a blessing.²⁵³

Tonight, however, Thornberry did not feel blessed. He should be celebrating. He should be relaxing with Wilson Fox and chatting up the new general manager of the Brazos River Authority, Colonel Walter J. Wells (a retired Corps man), but he couldn’t. For weeks, Thornberry had been working to get the North Fork and South Fork dams into the 1962 Omnibus Rivers

²⁵² Interviews: Charles Patterson, July, 1975, New York City. Patterson represented Williamson County in the Texas Legislature during the late 1960s. Pickle, April 18, 2000; “Homer Thornberry - Biographical Sketch,” *Austin American* morgue, Nov. 1962

²⁵³ Interview: Patterson. Also see Dave Shanks, “Thornberry Barbecue,” Sept. 1963, Austin Statesman library; Sam Wood, “Thornberry Quits; Election Upcoming,” Sept. 1963; Nat Henderson, “Wilson H. Fox Services Today,” *Austin American-Statesman*, Feb. 11, 1974, Center for American History

and Harbors Bill (Poage had predicted it couldn't be done) — and both the House and Senate had rewarded him.²⁵⁴ Georgetown's fourteen-year campaign for dams west of the county seat had finally paid off, thanks to him.²⁵⁵ But the Laneport viper always seemed ready to strike. Just now, he had heard a story that, apparently, was the talk of the party — trumping even the exciting news from Congress. On the country lane leading to Wilson Fox's ranch that afternoon, a new road sign had popped up. It warned passersby:

WEAK CONGRESSMAN

Three Miles

Someone had switched it with the usual Texas Highway Department sign that read, "Weak Bridge, 7 Miles." John Wehby, Taylor's KTAE radio station manager, and Wilson's son Jim had ripped down the offending sign, and Thornberry hadn't seen it, but the story flew around the party.²⁵⁶

"Weak Congressman"

²⁵⁴"Summary of Reports and Data on the 'Laneport' Dam," Williamson County Citizen's Committee to Col. F.P. Koisch, March 13, 1963, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 5. The House passed the bill Oct. 3, while the Senate passed it Oct. 4, 1962. President Kennedy signed into law the Flood Control Act, which authorized the San Gabriel North and South Fork and Laneport Reservoirs, on Oct. 23, a month before his assassination.

²⁵⁵Letter, Thornberry to unnamed, Jan. 24, 1963, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

²⁵⁶Interviews: Dr. James Fox, Sept. 6, 2000, Austin; Gene Fondren, March 9 and Sept. 1, 2000

Thornberry knew he should shrug it off, but the message gnawed at his innards. Actually, Thornberry's officially neutral stance on Laneport had never matched his acts, which had effectively iced Laneport at the blueprint stage. Moving with extreme caution, presumably to avoid alienating Wilson Fox, the Corps of Engineers and its admiring Texas Congressional delegation, Thornberry had kept Laneport nicely chilled at the "study" stage for fourteen years. Few if anyone in Williamson County appreciated Thornberry's maneuvers, which he could not afford to explain. Instead, he was derided by almost every faction. Of course, his was a position that could not be sustained, for as long as Laneport was stalled, so were the dams on the San Gabriel's North and South Forks that Georgetown and fifteen hundred farmers warmly desired.

"Thornberry was torn to pieces," said Pickle. "The controversy literally made him ill. I can still hear him: 'Jake, oh, oh, they're just giving me hell. They're tearing me apart!' He sensed he might lose the next election. Laneport took a toll on him. He didn't know whether to follow the Corps, or follow the people."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷Interview: Pickle, July 3, 1998

Nineteen sixty two had been quite a year. After the “small dams” petition failed to sway the House’s Rivers and Harbors Committee, and Laneport got the go-ahead at the end of 1961, players on both sides of the controversy were spent — all but Owen Sherrill. In January, Sherrill flew to Washington D.C. and gathered three powerful Brazos River Valley congressman — Thornberry, Poage and Olin “Tiger” Teague — in one room. On January 23, he talked them into signing a pact stating that they all would work for “simultaneous” construction of dams at North Fork and Laneport, along with construction of South Fork dam and a group of small earthen dams on the San Gabriel’s tributaries as quickly as feasible.²⁵⁸ The pact was legally and politically meaningless, but it inspired a bandwagon back home: the “simultaneous” dam movement.

Seven days later, the Army tried to squash Sherrill’s coup. Its Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors approved the Corps’ plan for sequenced — definitely not simultaneous — dam construction on the San Gabriel, with Laneport first in line. The Board rejected the Brazos congressmen’s request for “simultaneous” construction, as if it were nothing more than an irritating moth.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸Memorandum, conference between Owen W. Sherrill, Congressman W.E. Poage, Congressman Olin Teague and Congressman Homer Thornberry, Jan. 23, 1962, Washington, D.C.

²⁵⁹Letter, Col. Carl H. Bronn to Poage, Jan. 30, 1962, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

Williamson County tried again. The Commissioners Court and Taylor's City Commission backed dams west of Georgetown on the upper Gabriel, instead of the Corps' Laneport Dam. A plot developed. Sherrill wrote his ally, the general manager of the Brazos River Authority, "We will meet at Governor Price Daniel's office next Friday, Feb. 16th at 4:30 p.m. to further discuss San Gabriel dams. I trust Mr. Collins, you will be with us then. We are giving no publicity to this meeting, please."²⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, BRA directors unanimously urged Governor Daniel to support simultaneous construction of three dams on the San Gabriel River (North Fork, South Fork and Laneport), and requested control of all the impounded water.²⁶¹ In April, three hundred protestors from Williamson County, led by County Judge Sam V. Stone, pleaded their case before the Texas Water Commission. In the end, the Commission "disapproved" the Army's plan to built Laneport — a highly unusual rejection of federal largesse worth tens of millions of dollars to Texas. Indeed, the State of Texas came up with a substitute plan: it "ordered" the Army to build the three proposed San Gabriel dams "as a unit" — and simultaneously. If that was not possible, then North Fork dam should be built first, South Fork dam second, and the fifty "small" dams on the San Gabriel's tributaries third. Then, and

²⁶⁰Letter, Sherrill to Collins, Feb. 9, 1962, Box 59, BRA

²⁶¹Letter, Collins to Gov. Daniel, April 24, 1962, Box 59, BRA. The board voted at its regular meeting April 16, 1962.

only if it were clearly necessary, could the Army build an “adequate” Laneport dam.²⁶²

Congressman Poage was furious. After Governor Daniel had, in Poage’s words, “circumscribed” the Laneport plan, the Waco congressman wrote Henry Fox, his anger simmering on the typed page:

I am not charging you or any other individual with any bad faith. You were not a party to [the Sherrill] agreement, but there was an agreement to which I was a party . . . I think it is a waste of time to try to come to any further agreements with the people of Williamson County. I am not charging bad faith, but nobody has any authority to speak for these people and I am not interested in any further agreements where I will be bound but the folks upstream will not be . . .

²⁶³

Meanwhile, Sherrill boasted to Poage: “You can see where Owen — since County Agent days — 45 years ago knew so well that the engineers were so wrong, with a mud silt basin at Laneport . . . You [might] just as well recognize [Laneport] will be killed again and again, if Georgetown and Williamson County is not protected.”²⁶⁴

There things stood through the sweltering summer months. But in the fall of 1962, facing the formidable Jim Dobbs for his

²⁶²“An Order approving the feasibility of the North San Gabriel . . .”, Texas Water Commission, June 25, 1962, Box 59, BRA; “Alternate Sequence Proposed,” *Taylor Press*, June 26, 1962

²⁶³Letter, Poage to H.B. Fox, June 28, 1962, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

²⁶⁴Letter, Sherrill to Poage, Aug. 29, 1962, *ibid.*

job, Thornberry called in his chits. On October 4, the day of Fox's stag party at Hilda's Bottom, the U.S. House of Representatives authorized two "upper" San Gabriel dams, one on the North Fork, the other on the South Fork west of Georgetown. Since Laneport had been authorized for years, that made a grand total of three dams authorized within one county on one river about a hundred miles long.²⁶⁵ The estimated price tag for all three dams was \$45.4 million — approximately Williamson County's total appraised value.²⁶⁶

The timing couldn't have been better for Homer Thornberry. In full-page newspaper ads, Dobbs had been indirectly swiping at Thornberry by selling Dobbs's "vigorous" and "decisive" conservatism. The implication was that Thornberry could not get things done for his district.²⁶⁷ But now, Thornberry had proved he could deliver. The House had authorized North Fork and South Fork dams. There was no money to build them, and the question of what dam to build first still loomed. Still, it was a concrete step — one that appeared to

²⁶⁵The San Gabriel River is 112 miles long, ninety-five miles of which flows within Williamson County.

²⁶⁶The Senate quickly followed suit, and President John Kennedy signed the Flood Control Act on Oct. 23, 1962 — 14 days before the off-year elections. "Good News On The Dam," *Williamson County Sun*, Oct. 18, 1962; telegram, Yarborough to Hoster, *ibid.*

²⁶⁷Advertisement, "Jim Dobbs for Congress," *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 1, 1962

settle the question of whether Thornberry was an effective congressman.²⁶⁸

On November 6, Thornberry drubbed Dobbs, three to one throughout the Tenth Congressional District, only slightly less convincingly in Williamson County. He carried every Williamson County voting box, including Granger, which piled up an astonishing four-to-one margin.²⁶⁹ Wilson Fox reveled in those numbers, insisting that the Laneport imbroglio was nothing more than propaganda by “a few die hards.”²⁷⁰ Others credited the Czechs’ dogged fealty to the Democratic Party, along with their visceral distaste for anti-Catholic demagoguery, which Dobbs had liberally aimed at President Kennedy. Still others thought the Czechs could be bossed around — or even bought. “Historically, the east side of the county was always viewed by politicians as susceptible to political bossism, because of the nature of the ethnic communities,” said Charles Patterson, a former state representative from Taylor. “It was not unlike what can be seen

²⁶⁸“Chance For Upper Dams Brighter,” *Williamson County Sun*, Oct. 3, 1962; Note, RL to Harry Provence, Sept. 26, 1962, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

²⁶⁹“County Vote Follows Trend Set In Texas,” *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 8, 1962

²⁷⁰Letter, Wilson Fox to Poage, Feb. 25, 1963, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

in areas of New York and Boston.”²⁷¹ During Lyndon Johnson’s congressional days, the Czech vote in some “small rural towns” of the Tenth District was said have been for sale, though that practice may have ended by Thornberry’s time.²⁷² Whatever the reason for Thornberry’s stunning electoral success, most notably in Granger, his victory set the stage for a power realignment in Washington and Williamson County. At last, it seemed that Laneport was a sure thing. Only Henry Fox, “sage of Circleville,” vowed to continue fighting.²⁷³

Thornberry did not relish his triumph for long. In fact, he was sick of politics, coveting a quieter life serving on a judicial bench somewhere, anywhere. His close friend, Speaker Sam Rayburn, passed that idea along to President John F. Kennedy

²⁷¹Interview: Charles Patterson, Summer 1975, New York, N.Y.

²⁷²In *Path to Power*, Ed Clark told Robert Caro that the Czechs in three or four rural communities of the Tenth District were “for sale,” but that the price was high. Clark did not specify which communities, but at mid-century, Granger and Taylor contained the largest Czech communities in Texas, except for Fayetteville, which was not part of the Tenth District. Clark may have been exaggerating. Vintage Books (1983) New York. 408, 818. Former Congressman Pickle says he never heard of any Czech vote being for sale in his district, the Tenth.

²⁷³“Letter to the Editor,” H.B. Fox to Don Scarbrough, *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 8, 1962, 3; “Continued Fight Against Laneport Dam Is Pledged by Circleville Sage,” *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 15, 1963, 1

before Rayburn died. So when a federal district judge retired in El Paso, Kennedy remembered his promise to Rayburn. Vice President Johnson backed up Rayburn's suggestion and on July 9, 1963, the President announced the appointment.²⁷⁴ On September 26 — at Wilson Fox's barbecue — Thornberry announced he would leave Congress on December 20, 1963. That would give the Tenth Congressional District time to select a new congressman. Under the towering burr oaks, Vice President Johnson spoke of Thornberry's friendship and service in Congress, calling him "truly a workhorse." Governor John Connally praised him, as did Wilson Fox. "After hearing all of these remarks, I am almost tempted to announce my re-election for Congress," Thornberry joked.²⁷⁵

The two top Democratic Party hopefuls did not bother to eat steak that night. They shook hands — every hand they could grasp among Thornberry's fifteen hundred well-wishers. Representative Jack Ritter of the State Legislature had been campaigning for weeks. Public relations man J.J. "Jake" Pickle, one of Lyndon Johnson's crack political operatives, told friends he'd make an announcement the next day.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴"JFK Appoints Thornberry Judge, Keeps Promise to Sam Rayburn," *Austin American*, July 10, 1963; "Kennedy Names Thornberry Judge," *Williamson County Sun*, July 11, 1963

²⁷⁵Sam Wood, "Thornberry Quits; Election Upcoming," *Austin American*, Sept. 1963, 1

²⁷⁶*Ibid.*

“At the time, the most controversial issue in the Tenth was Laneport,” Pickle remembered. “Thornberry got Laneport authorized, but he couldn’t get any money for it. It was not an easy job selling a dam on the San Gabriel River in those days. Thornberry told me, ‘I’m going to leave that with you. Haw, haw.’”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷Interview: Pickle. April 18, 2000, Austin

7

“Hatchet Man” and Technocrat

Could J.J. “Jake” Pickle get elected to Congress? Savvy politicians wondered, Lyndon Johnson included. Many felt that Pickle’s liabilities would cancel his assets. For two decades he had “carried wood and water” while Johnson ran Texas’ National Youth Administration during the Depression and after Johnson’s election to Congress; later Pickle served the same function for two Texas governors. He specialized in the the rough, queasy edges of campaigning while soaking up charisma and tactics from

master politicians.²⁷⁸ While Johnson represented the Tenth District, he treasured Pickle's weekly letters, bristling with enough intelligence to turn a CIA operative green. Pickle was a natural reporter, an astute reader of *Realpolitik*. He was practical, capable, likeable, and a straight shooter. No one could best him as a story teller. And (a huge advantage) he knew the Tenth and its powerful players intimately. But Pickle carried one thick scar: his reputation as a "hatchet man" for Lyndon Johnson and Governors Allan Shivers and Price Daniel. As he put it himself,

I got to be a hatchet man; that is, I got termed as the man . . . calling the signals . . . Well, I'll admit to some forcefulness in some of those actions because if you've got a job to do and your boss man the Governor says, "Let's do *this*," you *do* it! And you don't do it in a pussyfooting manner . . .²⁷⁹

Pickle had taken his time deciding to run for Homer Thornberry's congressional seat, having spent much of the summer before Thornberry's valedictory barbecue thinking about it. For the first time in his life, he had a high-paying job at the Texas Employment Commission that did not depend on other men's political fortunes. Widowed eleven years earlier when his only child, Peggy, was six, Pickle had recently remarried Beryl

²⁷⁸Jake Pickle and Peggy Pickle. *Jake* (1997), University of Texas Press, Austin, 83; Oral History, J.J. "Jake" Pickle, I: 12, May 31, 1970 and IV: 32-34, Aug. 25, 1971, LBJ Library

²⁷⁹Oral History IV: 32-34; Pickle, 72-75

Bolton McCarroll, a widow with two sons. They were enjoying family life on Cherry Lane in Austin. Pickle knew Beryl would recoil at the very notion of political wifhood.²⁸⁰ He also knew that in some corners of the Tenth, he was feared more than liked. Vice President Johnson sent no word of encouragement. All Pickle heard from his old boss in Washington was a secondhand caution: might his former aide be too “cut up” to win?²⁸¹ Homer Thornberry, another close friend, warned Pickle that being congressman was “a mean job.”²⁸²

But Pickle was 49 and ambitious; he did not want to spend his peak years running a government agency.²⁸³ In the political arena, he said decades later, “the brass ring comes around once. You grab it or you miss it. Very seldom . . . does it float around a second time.”²⁸⁴ After Governor John Connally’s wife Nellie quietly told Beryl that her husband would never stop second-guessing himself if he did not at least try for Congress, Beryl agreed. Pickle timed his announcement to follow Thornberry’s public statement that his last day in the House of Representatives would be December 20, 1963.

²⁸⁰Oral History IV: 32, 35, 39-40. In 1942 Pickle married Ella Nora “Sugar” Critz, daughter of a Granger attorney, Richard Critz, who had become a Texas Supreme Court Judge. Peggy, the Pickles’ only child, was three when her mother discovered she had breast cancer. “Sugar” Pickle died in 1952.

²⁸¹Ibid., IV: 36-38

²⁸²Ibid, IV: 36

²⁸³Pickle, 222

²⁸⁴Ibid, IV: 41-42



Figure 21: J.J. "Jake" Pickle



Figure 22: Walter Wells

In a November 9 special election, Pickle led Republican Jim Dobbs and Jack Ritter, a liberal Democrat from Austin — but not by much. Ritter failed to make the cut, and a December 17 runoff date was set between Pickle and Dobbs.²⁸⁵ But on November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President John Fitzgerald Kennedy during a Dallas motorcade parade designed to shore up Democratic votes and raise money for Kennedy’s re-election bid in Texas. Within hours, President Lyndon Johnson was in charge of a stunned nation, frightened at what appeared to be a conspiracy of right-wing extremists emanating from Dallas, somehow manipulated by the Communist Soviet Union. Dobbs’s ultra-conservative campaign, bankrolled by Dallas oil tycoon H.L. Hunt and hostile to “big” government, Roman Catholicism, minorities and the deceased President — fizzled.²⁸⁶ Dobbs’s views had “lost their zing.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵In those days, Texas’ Democratic Party was torn between a “liberal” wing which included Ralph Yarborough, Maury Maverick and Ritter and the “moderate” wing, which consisted of Lyndon Johnson, John B. Connally and Pickle, among others.

²⁸⁶Pickle, *ibid.* Hunt was a storied character who is said to have used \$30,000 he won in a poker game to buy up an East Texas oil field. By 1935, he was worth \$100 million. In the 1940’s he wrote a novel, *Alpaca*, which portrayed a utopian society in which the oldest, wealthiest and most ambitious counted more at the voting booth than others.

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*, IV-44; “Runoff Decision to K-O GOP In 10 Says Jake,” *Williamson County Sun*, Nov. 21, 1963

During the campaign, Pickle refused to take a position on Laneport Dam.²⁸⁸ “I inherited the controversy in mid-air collision,” he jokes, shuddering in mock horror.²⁸⁹ In a bit of political miscalculation, Henry Fox tried to squeeze Pickle into a policy vise on Laneport, earning Pickle’s undying dislike. Right after Pickle led the special election, Fox shot off a polite request to Pickle’s Austin home: “Would you . . . commit yourself to abide by the decision of the majority of the qualified voters in the San Gabriel watershed . . . on how the San Gabriel River should be controlled?” he queried. Fox wanted a popular referendum, and he asked Pickle to commit himself to back the referendum’s results. He wanted Pickle’s answer by November 20.²⁹⁰

Pickle struggled to come up with a diplomatic answer to Fox’s challenge, three times reworking his reply. In the midst of these revisions, Pickle’s brother-in-law, Georgetown Mayor J. Thatcher Atkin, forwarded Pickle a note that Henry Fox had mailed to Atkin.²⁹¹ “I didn’t lift a hand in the election,” Henry Fox had written Atkin,

²⁸⁸Letters, L.D. Hammack to Pickle, Oct. 2, 1963, Box 95-112/10, Pickle Papers, Center for American History, Austin; Joe Provaznik to Pickle, Oct. 3, 1963, *ibid.*; Mr. and Mrs. R.C. Thomas to Pickle, Oct. 4, 1963, *ibid.*; John Provaznik to Pickle, undated, *ibid.*; Felix Matl to Pickle, Oct. 10, 1963, *ibid.*; Alfred J. Wacker to Pickle, Oct. 4, 1963, *ibid.*; “Gabriel headed for the Gulf,” *Williamson County Sun*, Oct. 31, 1963, *ibid.*

²⁸⁹Interview: Pickle, July 3, 1998, Austin

²⁹⁰Letter, Henry Fox to Pickle, Nov. 11, 1963, Pickle Papers, Box 95-112/10, Center for American History

²⁹¹Atkin’s wife was Genevieve Critz Atkin, sister of Ella Nora “Sugar” Critz, Pickle’s deceased first wife. Though Pickle remarried in 1960, he had remained close to Judge and Mrs. Critz, who had

but if Pickle declines to agree with the inclosed, it'll be a different story in the run-off. Should Pickle decline to respect the majority opinion of us folks on the San Gabriel through the heart of two counties, a lot can be made out of it, not just here but throughout the 10th District, and we've got the talent and money to do it with.

Atkin scribbled a worried postscript: "Dear Jake: I know how harassed you must feel but I believe it would be in your interest to go along on this . . ." ²⁹² Pickle's last draft of his reply to Henry Fox barely resembled his first conciliatory attempts. In the final version that Fox received, Pickle wrote adamantly, "I favor the construction of all three dams on the San Gabriel . . ."

. . . . I am not against any of the dams. I want to be Congressman of a district that builds dams, that provides water storage, water conservation and flood protection . . . I am strong for the Georgetown dams . . . At the same time, I do not wish to oppose any dam, and cannot agree with you that a referendum should be the sole determining factor. ²⁹³

Three days later, Kennedy was martyred and Pickle was unbeatable. The Tenth's vote — Pickle two to one — was a show of confidence in President Johnson and in the United States of

helped raise Peggy, and to "Sugar's" sister and brother-in-law, Genevieve and Thatcher Atkin.

²⁹²Letter, H.B. Fox to Atkin and Atkin to Pickle, Nov. 15, 1963, Pickle Papers, Box 95-112/10, Center for American History

²⁹³Letter, Pickle to H.B. Fox, Nov. 19, 1963, *ibid.*

America, as much as a validation of Pickle. It was not a time to rattle government stability.²⁹⁴

Pickle threw himself into the task of securing every possible dam on the San Gabriel River. Dams were almost a religion with him, as they had been for Lyndon Johnson and most Texas Congressmen. Three weeks after being sworn into the House, Pickle heard from Wilson Fox, Laneport dam's most important backer. The Williamson County Democratic Party chairman offered to host a barbecue for Pickle, continuing the tradition he had established for Thornberry. "I want something done this year on these dams," Pickle wrote back. "If we miss this chance, we may not make the grade again, and that would be a shame."²⁹⁵ Pickle knew that the good will enveloping the Johnson Administration, and him as a staunch supporter of the President, would soon erode. So he pushed to bring the San Gabriel dams onto Congress's appropriations platter. Poage, pessimistic as usual, thought it impossible, but on January 21, 1964, less than a

²⁹⁴"Unite Behind LBJ Jake Pickle Urges" and "LBJ Could Be Hurt Dec. 17th," *Williamson County Sun*, Dec. 5, 1963; "Everything's Jake! Pickle Wins By 2-to-1," *Williamson County Sun*, Dec. 19, 1963

²⁹⁵Letters, Wilson Fox to Pickle, Jan. 10, 1964, and Pickle to Fox, Jan. 15, 1964, Pickle Papers, Leg/Public Works/San Gabriel, Center for American History

month after Pickle entered Congress, the President handed a \$97.7 billion budget to Congress which included \$400,000 for pre-construction planning of three “simultaneous” San Gabriel River dams.²⁹⁶

Two snags developed. The first, and most serious, came from the Brazos River Authority, which in September 1962 had brought in a meticulous Army engineer who had headed the Corps’ Fort Worth District to replace R.D. Collins, whose illness of several years had hampered his ability to run the show.²⁹⁷ Collins and John McCall were now both dead, and with both men gone the old “connection” between Georgetown and the Brazos River Authority, once so deftly milked by Owen Sherrill, was moribund as well.²⁹⁸

The new general manager, Colonel Walter Johnson Wells, was a politically astute pragmatist armed with the vision of basin-wide operation, which he pressed upon his directors in opposition to their previous tendency to analyze projects as individual units.²⁹⁹ He had closely examined his board of directors’ 1962 politically inspired directive, urged by Collins, for

²⁹⁶“There is no chance whatever of getting any appropriation,” Poage wrote Sherrill on Nov. 5, 1963. Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers. Memo, unsigned to Pickle, Jan. 21, 1964; press release, Department of the Army, Jan. 21, 1964; telegram, Senator Ralph Yarborough to Sherrill, Jan. 21, 1964, Box 59, BRA; “Gabriel Dams Are \$400,000 Closer — Maybe,” *Williamson County Sun*, Jan. 23, 1964

²⁹⁷Hendrickson, 142, 180-181

²⁹⁸“John D. McCall, Attorney, Dies,” *Dallas Times Herald*, March 23, 1962

²⁹⁹Hendrickson, 162. I have heavily depended on Hendrickson’s thorough history of the Brazos Water Authority, *Waters of the Brazos*, for my treatment of Wells.

“simultaneous” construction of three dams on the San Gabriel and found a blueprint for economic disaster.³⁰⁰ Wells’ reaction threatened to scuttle the entire San Gabriel dam package.

Meanwhile, a freshly energized opposition movement to Laneport dam — this one emanating from Taylor’s leading business concerns — also created problems for Pickle, who, if he wanted hard cash for the projects, had to convince Congress that his constituents really wanted the dams. Despite considerable pressure, Pickle stuck to his guns. “I am not favoring any one dam or dams over another and I . . . will not change my position,” he repeatedly wrote to exasperated Williamson County correspondents.³⁰¹

The BRA had overextended itself financially and was in serious trouble on several fronts, particularly along the Navasota River.³⁰² Four decades later, a long-time BRA public affairs director described how things looked from within the agency during the Sixties:

³⁰⁰Memo, “Meeting with Georgetown leaders on the San Gabriel projects,” Feb. 17, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³⁰¹Letter, Pickle to R.J. Bartosh, Jan. 23, 1964, File Leg/PW/San Gabriel, Center for American History

³⁰²Hendrickson, 135-148. Several proposed dam sites on the Navasota were opposed by a coalition of landowners who in many respects resembled the opponents of Laneport, except that valuable deposits of lignite were involved. By 1997, Limestone dam had been built and two others, Millican and Navasota, had been struck from the BRA’s “recommended” reservoirs list. See *Water For Texas*, Vol. II, Texas Water Development Board (1997), 3-150-151

Everything built in those days was driven by the drought of the Fifties. Everybody was convinced you had to capture every drop of water. The BRA took the position that it would sign contracts, with no source of revenue, with no demand. Nobody needed that much water. The view that they took, and mind, you could never repeat it today, was: “We’re going to step out on this high wire with no net. We’re a regional agency and we have responsibility for this basin.” When they signed those contracts, they had no way to pay.³⁰³

The agreement to “simultaneously” construct three San Gabriel dams had been the key to unlocking Congress’s authorization of the North and South Fork Dams, but it also seemed designed to push the BRA off its high wire. Under the “simultaneous” scenario, the BRA had to sell water from the San Gabriel dams at prices variously estimated at from fourteen to twenty dollars an acre foot to repay the federal government for the “local” share of construction costs.³⁰⁴ But the top water price the Brazos Authority was actually getting was six dollars an acre foot. BRA board member Harry Provence, publisher of the *Waco News-Tribune*, put it bluntly in a letter to Pickle:

We have run our necks into a \$24 millions noose on other Brazos tributary reservoirs already, gambling that at \$6 an acre foot we could come out even in years ahead when water demand increases in the basin. But the prospective \$15 to \$17 an acre foot on the Gabriels could not be

³⁰³Telephone interview: Mike Bukala, Oct. 31, 2000, Waco

³⁰⁴Memo: Walter J. Wells for the Record, Feb. 17, 1964, Box 59, BRA. Later estimates extended the range from \$12 to \$23 an acre foot.

recovered unless that was the only water left in the state, which won't be the case . . . ³⁰⁵

The only way to make *any* dam in the San Gabriel Valley pay, ran the new BRA manager's theory, was to build single-purpose flood control dams but keep the reservoirs behind them dry, except, of course, during floods. "It is difficult to sell an empty reservoir as an idea, but it is the only idea that makes any economic sense on the Gabriels," Provence asserted. Williamson County would never need as much water as the proposed dams would store, Provence thought, along with other BRA officials and the Army's top planners. A few local voices from Williamson County preached that Georgetown and Taylor would grow rapidly, if only they had dependable water supplies. (Interestingly, Owen W. Sherrill and his alter ego, Wilson Fox, each hammered at this point, with Sherrill accurately forecasting Georgetown's future development, and Fox overestimating Taylor's.) Everyone else discounted the combined power of the new Interstate 35 and stored waters to send Williamson County's population skyrocketing.

Wells met with Williamson County leaders, warning that the surface water created by the proposed lakes could be too expensive for them — or anyone — to buy.³⁰⁶ He didn't say how

³⁰⁵Letter, Harry Provence to Pickle, Feb. 29, 1964, *ibid.*

³⁰⁶In the terminology of water developers, "surface" water is water from lakes or reservoirs; "ground" water is well water pumped from underground aquifers.

much the water might cost, but he characterized it as “sky high.” By now, the local leadership had evolved. In Taylor, Wells dealt almost exclusively with Wilson Fox. Pickle’s brother-in-law, Thatcher Atkin, led the Georgetown delegation, which included banker Grogan Lord and his top employee, Jay Sloan, businessman Charles Forbes and *Sun* owner Don Scarbrough.³⁰⁷

Previously, Taylor and Georgetown had mostly agreed that dams above Georgetown would be better for the county than one large dam at Laneport, but Wilson Fox fired off numerous letters to Wells and Pickle characterizing the controversy as a long-standing contest between Georgetown and Taylor for the proposed dams’ assumed spoils. It was a simplification of a complex story. Pickle picked up this view and passed it on in a letter to Wells: “Georgetown and Taylor continue to shoot 16-inch cannon each week at each other — with me in the middle!”³⁰⁸ Animosity between the two towns festered. Newspaper editorials berated the other city’s position as self-serving or worse. For the first time, the *Taylor Press* endorsed Laneport.³⁰⁹ Meanwhile, from Milam County, which rarely seemed exercised about the dam controversy, a Soil Conservation Service

³⁰⁷Letters, Wilson Fox to Wells, Feb. 3, 1964; Wells to Fox, Feb. 6, 1964; Memo, Wells for the Record, Feb. 17, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³⁰⁸Letter, Pickle to Wells, March 3, 1964, *ibid.*

³⁰⁹Don Scarbrough, “The Passing Glance,” *Williamson County Sun*, Feb. 13, 1964; “Time to Get the Job Done,” *Taylor Daily Press*, Feb. 14, 1964; H.B. Fox, “Would You Really Like To Know What The Laneport Dam Would Do?,” *Williamson County Sun*, Feb. 27, 1964; Don Scarbrough, “New Dam Era,” *ibid.*

supervisor attacked Laneport. In Granger, a high school teacher whipped up his agricultural students to protest Laneport dam.³¹⁰ And a new anti-Laneport, pro-Georgetown dam petition was floated.³¹¹ Taylor and Georgetown flew separate delegations to Washington to lobby Pickle; both cities feared if one dam were built first, the other, or others, would never get built — not an unreasonable worry, as Congress rarely funded multiple-dam projects, especially on small rivers.³¹²

In the midst of this confusing swirl, the Brazos River Authority's Wells recommended that his board formally request the Corps to "reconsider" the size of conservation pools at Laneport, North Fork and South Fork, "with a view toward reducing the costs of such space and the costs of water yielded therefrom." The board agreed, and Wells sent the resolution to the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Public Works and held his breath.³¹³

With Pickle's election, Henry Fox and Owen Sherrill became *persona non grata*. Pickle was determined not to be "torn to pieces" over the San Gabriel River's fate as Homer Thornberry had been. Sherrill's missives to Pickle took on a forlorn tone. "I wish you'd call me collect sometime when you're in Texas,"

³¹⁰Letter, Clarence R. Matula to Pickle, Feb. 28, 1964; Hubert Gorubec to Pickle, April 21, 1964, Leg/PW/San Gabriel River, Pickle Papers

³¹¹Petition, Felma Headrick to Pickle, May 1, 1964

³¹²Letter, Pickle to Provence, March 24, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³¹³Memo, Pickle to File, April 29, 1964; and Draft of Proposed Resolution, April 9, 1964, Leg/PW/San Gabriel Reservoirs, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

Sherrill wrote. "I've been chairman of the dam committee over 10 years . . ." He also complained to Pickle, "I am just your step child."³¹⁴ But Sherrill no longer could "pull wires" as he once had, and Pickle took care to finesse him, especially when Sherrill threatened to destabilize a delicate agreement.³¹⁵ Henry Fox was another matter. After Wilson's brother tried to become the "hatchet man" against Pickle during his first campaign, Pickle would have nothing to do with Henry. When Georgetown newspaperman Scarbrough suggested that Pickle "court" this antagonist, Pickle replied,

I don't see how there is any way I can court Henry Fox Henry not only wants to needle me, but he obviously wants to destroy me. His letter to the editor I am sure created a great deal of mirth among the voters, and it was a particularly cruel sort of thing to do to me. Surely he knows that pairing a vote is not being afraid to cast a vote and is oftentime a courtesy rather than a lack of determination . . .
. ³¹⁶

Nearly forty years later, a decade after Henry Fox's death, Pickle bridled at mention of his name. "He was an aberration,"

³¹⁴Letters, Sherrill to Pickle, June 1, 1964; Sept. 23, 1966, *ibid.*

³¹⁵Sherrill was deeply disappointed that South Fork dam was eliminated from the San Gabriel public works package, but he could not (and would not) stop the process once North Fork dam shared a construction timetable with Laneport. To reduce Sherrill's influence, Pickle rigorously ignored him, but when Sherrill was honored in 1964 as Texas Realtor of the Year, Pickle inserted Sherrill's biography in the *Congressional Record*. "You are sweet," Sherrill wrote Pickle.

³¹⁶Letters, Don Scarbrough to Pickle, June 29, 1964; Pickle to Scarbrough, July 7, 1964, Leg/PW/San Gabriel Reservoirs, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

Pickle said. “Henry Fox was amused at causing conflict, humor, consternation, discomfort. He was a controversial animal. You couldn’t put your money in the bank on him. He had fun poking fun at people. That satisfied him.”³¹⁷

Pickle wanted to move the San Gabriel dams from the authorization to construction stage, but Williamson County continued its multi-pronged resistance. Within the county, virtually anyone paying attention to such things viewed at least one of the proposed dams as a “special interest” boondoggle — the dam the “other” city wanted. The farm and ranch community stalled against them all, still hoping for the “small dams” program it preferred. “Last week,” Pickle wrote his newspaper friend in Waco, “I spent a couple of hours with Don Scarbrough in Georgetown and got hung again on high-center about these dams.

I offered to get one or two persons from Georgetown, Taylor, and Granger together and lock them up in a room with officials of the BRA, Texas Water Commission and myself, throw away the key until we agreed on something. As usual, I came away with no definite answer. I am thinking about making the same proposal to the Taylor folks . . . ³¹⁸

³¹⁷Interview: Pickle, April 18, 2000. Antipathy between Pickle and Fox was mutual. In one of Fox’s books of political satire, *The 2000-Mile Turtle*, Fox lampooned a congressman he dubbed “Jake Dill,” who supported a despised Corps of Engineers dam. The caricature was not a kind one.

³¹⁸Letter, Pickle to Provence, July 24, 1964, Box 59, BRA. As well as being the publisher of the Waco newspaper, Provence sat on the board of directors of the BRA.

Pickle's fantasy was part joke, part hint of the strong-arm "compromise" he later devised and put over with the help of Wells. But at this point, Pickle was starting to wonder whether the struggle was worth it. The idea of building three dams simultaneously "might be a compromise," Pickle told one BRA director, "yet it will basically take us away from the original purpose of these dams — namely, the conservation of as much water possible in any given reservoir . . ." ³¹⁹ This was an arresting statement, because until now, flood control had always been the driving force behind damming the San Gabriel.

Pickle's words revealed his own belief in dams, as well as what had changed over the project's fifteen-year life span. The original flood-control dams were conceived as the best way to serve the agrarian population in Williamson County and in the Brazos basin. But now, the county was starting to grow, spurred by the new interstate highway which was slicing through the Austin Chalk along the Balcones Escarpment, passing Hill Country ranch land worth perhaps thirty-five to a hundred dollars an acre, but now potentially fetching much more.³²⁰ For the first time since Europeans set foot in Williamson County, it was possible to believe that the rugged caliche limestone outcroppings and mesquite pastures of west Williamson County might outpace the fabulous Black Waxy as an economic engine.

³¹⁹Ibid.

³²⁰Clara Scarbrough, *Land of Good Water*, 345-346

The thought surfaced and spread, like ripples on a pond, that water supply might be considerably more urgent to the cause of economic development than flood control. The *Williamson County Sun* broadcast this theme:

Strangely, one of the most compelling reasons why Georgetown people should want dams located above Georgetown has scarcely been mentioned during the past five or six years of agreements and controversy raging around the subject. That reason is a water supply for this growing community.³²¹

On June 16, the House included \$400,000 for pre-construction planning of the San Gabriel River dams in its Public Works Appropriation Bill.³²² In August, Congress sent it to the President, who signed it into law.³²³ Pickle took pains to credit former Congressman Thornberry with getting the San Gabriel funds. But the fact that Pickle so aggressively sought dams across his district, and the fact that President Lyndon Johnson was the most notable constituent of Pickle's Tenth District, probably helped.³²⁴

³²¹Letter, Buck Hood to Pickle, April 21, 1964, with undated enclosure, "Cities Outgrow," *Williamson County Sun* editorial, Leg/PW/San Gabriel Reservoirs, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

³²²Telegram, Pickle to Don Scarbrough, etc., June 16, 1964, *ibid.*; and "400,000 Okayed For Planning Dams," June 18, 1964, *Williamson County Sun*

³²³Telegram, Pickle to Scarbrough, etc., Aug. 15, 1964, Leg/PW/San Gabriel Reservoirs, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

³²⁴Letter, Pickle to David V. Hoster, Aug. 27, 1964, *ibid.*

A solution to the deadlock between Georgetown and Taylor over the fate of the dams started coagulating in 1964 during private talks between Pickle and Walter Wells. Rawleigh Elliott, Georgetown's new mayor, had called the Brazos River Authority during the summer to find out how much water from North Fork reservoir would cost Georgetown. A BRA engineer researched the matter and reported to Wells that North Fork water could cost as much as twenty dollars an acre foot, "but I did not tell Mayor Elliott about this."³²⁵ In the meantime, Elliott called on Williamson County's city governments and the BRA to discuss what the various cities might expect in the way of water supply and cost. Elliott's questions focused the BRA's attention on what turned out to be an embarrassing Corps of Engineers blooper, throwing all previous calculations into question. As the BRA's chief engineer dryly noted,

The Corps of Engineers apparently did not consider prior water rights of downstream appropriators in determining the yields shown in the San Gabriel Watershed Project, and the [Brazos River] Authority has made no studies in sufficient detail to determine the yields of the reservoirs after honoring such rights.³²⁶

The Army's failure to factor in the rights of the downstream water users — primarily Dow Chemical Company and the coastal

³²⁵Memo, T.B. Hunter, "Cost of Water on San Gabriel's Project," Aug. 12, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³²⁶Memo, Burke G. Bryan, "Proposed San Gabriel Dams," Aug. 21, 1964, *ibid.*

rice farmers, both of whom used enormous quantities of water — meant that the annual estimated cost of water per acre foot would rise by six cents over original estimates during the first stage of construction and another five cents during the second and third stages. That meant cost increases of \$1.8 million for Laneport, \$800,000 for North Fork, and \$430,000 for South Fork, or \$48.5 million for the whole San Gabriel project, rather than \$45.5 million. And that meant that cities would undoubtedly pay more for their water than previously thought.³²⁷

The Army engineers offered a quick solution which, as usual, ignored Williamson County's local needs. They suggested building three flood control dams in Williamson County that normally would hold no water. In other words, the three reservoirs behind the new dams would be dry — dredged pits — except during floods. (This was what the Army had wanted all along if it was forced to build the North and South Fork dams, which it considered poor projects.) County Judge Sam V. Stone was horrified, along with everyone else in Williamson County. Stone implored Pickle to work at “retaining the water conservation feature of these 3 dams.”³²⁸

The crisis might have inspired cooperation. Instead it further antagonized Taylor and Georgetown, the towns most clearly representing the fears and ambitions of the people living

³²⁷Memo, Bryan, Aug. 13, 1964, *ibid.*

³²⁸Letter, Sam V. Stone to Pickle, Aug. 18, 1964, Leg/PW/San Gabriel Reservoirs, Pickle Papers

on the Black Waxy as opposed to those who had settled along the Balcones Escarpment. Pickle complained to Wilson Fox, “I don’t see any sign of anybody weakening, compromising or listening — yet.”³²⁹ Following Wilson Fox’s advice, Taylor’s city commissioners resolved that Laneport be constructed at the “earliest possible date,” with “no reduction in the height, size or conservation storage of the dam and reservoir as now proposed . . .”³³⁰

The words sounded innocuous enough, but they seriously threatened Pickle’s chance of getting Congress to appropriate money for the dams. With its resolution, Taylor rejected the “simultaneous” construction agreement hammered out three years earlier, which had used the language of cooperation required by congressional etiquette, and with it the BRA’s attempt to find a formula to reduce the cost of San Gabriel water. Wells was plainly disgusted. With understated irony, he wrote Wilson Fox,

We are glad to receive this evidence of sentiment in support of the Laneport project. We are disappointed, however, to note that the [Taylor] City’s resolution indicates opposition to the effort being undertaken by the Authority to achieve a reduction in the local interests’ share of the project costs As you know, general agreement of the varied local

³²⁹Letter, Pickle to Wilson Fox, Aug. 4, 1964, BBQ, Pickle Papers

³³⁰Letter, Wilson Fox to Wells, Aug. 28, 1964, with attached Taylor Commission “Resolution,” Aug. 26, 1964, Box 59, BRA

interests . . . would be extremely helpful in getting reservoirs under construction on the San Gabriel River.³³¹

In a report to BRA directors, including Wilson and Henry Fox's brother, J. Howard Fox of Hearne, Wells expressed his exasperation at Taylor's surprising change of position. "It looks as though we still have a lot of work ahead of us on the San Gabriels. It is interesting to note that even when people come out in favor of something they have to express opposition to something else at the same time."³³² Ten days later, Taylor's Chamber of Commerce reiterated the city's official stance on Laneport, and the *Taylor Press* followed suit, pointing out that Laneport water would cost "only" an estimated twelve dollars an acre foot, compared to North Fork and South Fork water, at sixteen and twenty-three dollars an acre foot, respectively. The only reasonable thing to do, the *Press* argued, was to build Laneport immediately.³³³ Wells was not happy. "Somebody has to pay for the local interests' share of the project costs," he lectured Wilson Fox,

and the costs even at the Laneport project alone are such that the cost per acre-foot of water is much higher than for any other reservoir in the basin . . . No one other than the [Brazos] Authority has indicated a willingness to sign up to

³³¹Letter, Wells to Wilson Fox, Sept. 1, 1964, *ibid.*

³³²Memo, Wells to J. Howard Fox, etc., Sept. 1, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³³³Resolution, Taylor Chamber of Commerce, Sept. 10, 1964, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers; "One or Nothing," *Taylor Daily Press*, Sept. 17, 1964, *ibid.*

pay the local interests' share of the cost. If the people are willing to have the Authority assume this responsibility, it seems they should be willing to support the Authority's efforts.³³⁴

In early September, Mayor Elliott invited officials from Georgetown, Taylor, Granger, Thrall, Circleville and Round Rock to hear Wells on the subject of projected water costs. Wells used the opportunity to take the competing dam forces to task, suggesting that the opposition simply "erase" itself.³³⁵ The Taylor *Press* reported,

The BRA manager told the civic leaders in sharp language that delays on San Gabriel have been due to a lack of coordinated meeting of the minds of the local people in Williamson County. When there is dissension, said Colonel Wells, Congress approves appropriations for other projects where local citizens are in agreement.³³⁶

Of course, this was precisely what Thornberry and Poage had been saying for years. But now, with pre-construction planning under way, and the realization that the new interstate

³³⁴Letter, Wells to Wilson Fox, Sept. 24, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³³⁵Letters, R.S. Elliott to Wells, Sept. 2, 1964; Wells to Pickle, April 6, 1966, Box 59, BRA. Bartlett, Hutto and Thorndale were invited but did not attend the meeting. It is interesting to note that Round Rock, for the very first time, was included in talks about water planning. Until 1964, Round Rock was never mentioned in policy and planning papers relating to water supply from the San Gabriel River. In 1964, its population was about 2,300 and it was on the path of an interstate highway that was under construction. It was also the nearest city of any size to Austin, a distance of twenty miles. By 1980, 15,000 people lived in Round Rock proper and it was by far the largest water user in Williamson County.

³³⁶"Brazos Unit Backs Gabriel Project," *Taylor Daily Press*, Sept. 11, 1964

highway might stimulate growth, the county needed to decide. If Georgetown and Taylor leaders persisted in pecking the life out of each other's pet projects, Congress would balk. Nor would Congress spend a penny for the San Gabriel River dams unless the BRA stuck by its pledge to repay the "local" cost of construction. But unless the BRA could maneuver the Army into bringing water costs down to a level that cities could actually pay, the project was dead. Neither Wells nor Pickle wanted that scenario.

Wells' published comments galvanized Laneport's beleaguered opponents, who, after having lost Georgetown as an ally in its quest to get the North and South Fork dams, had been reduced to the farmers whose land would be condemned and sympathetic agricultural interests, as well as some financial and business interests in Taylor and Granger whose enterprises would suffer with the loss of their agricultural base. Shortly after Mayor Elliott's meeting, Joe Zimmerhanel, owner of Taylor Meat Company, who with his brothers would grill steaks for Wilson Fox's "Pickle Barbecue Blowout" later that fall, spelled out why he thought Pickle should oppose Laneport dam. "I just can't help but feel you'd be in favor of dams at Georgetown if you knew this area like I do," he wrote. Then he continued,

Through my store here at Circleville last year I handled over 700,000 pounds of pecans, and most of this would be gone if the Laneport dam is built. The 18,000 acres of land that would be covered is easily producing over \$1,000,000 a year in cotton, corn, maize, pecans and cattle, and I don't see how Taylor could ever attract enough industry through a Laneport to equal that If they build the dam at Laneport, then this business which I've spent over 20 years building up will sure be for sale.³³⁷

A few days before Pickle's barbecue was to take place, a full-page advertisement ran in the Taylor *Press*. Signed by three hundred and twenty people from Taylor, Granger and Circleville, it was addressed to the Taylor Chamber of Commerce, the City Commission, and people of Taylor. The owners of all three Taylor banks signed the ad, as did the owners of Taylor's most important industry, Taylor Bedding Manufacturing, one of the world's largest mattress makers. The ad posed the question:

WHY NOT INDUSTRY & AGRICULTURE BOTH?

This year the 16,000 acres of blackland which would be covered by the proposed Laneport Dam have produced over \$1,250,000 in revenue

If Taylor had an opportunity to get an industry which would release one and a quarter million dollars into the economy of this area annually, it would be justifiably proud and pleased, yet here some of you are arguing you should wipe out such an industry by building the Laneport Dam.

³³⁷Letter, Joe Zimmerhanel to Pickle, Sept. 5, 1964, BBQ, Pickle Papers

Let's agree. Taylor in the future may need more water. Why not get that water and any industry it may bring, and still retain those 16,000 acres of good blackland? **WHY NOT HAVE BOTH INDUSTRY AND AGRICULTURE?**

Two big dams at Georgetown will store enough water for all the towns in Williamson County, even if they triple in size. Taylor could get all the water it needs by letting it flow by gravity down the river to Circleville, where it could be pumped by pipe line to town This would give Taylor all the water it needs for all the industry it can get.³³⁸

Wilson Fox was beside himself. He and his baby brother, Henry, hadn't spoken for years because of their differences over Laneport dam, but this was the limit. Having personally engineered the Taylor City Commission's and Chamber of Commerce's pro-Laneport resolutions, he should not have been astonished that Henry might reply in kind. Wilson Fox sputtered his rage in a letter to Wells which grossly underestimated the opposition sentiment flooding into congressional representatives' offices:

. . . the opposition to the Laneport Dam led entirely by two land owners in the proposed basin have now bombarded our merchants, bankers, with petitions opposing the construction of the Laneport Dam and understand have gotten some rather prominent people to sign same. I do not believe I have ever seen anything opposed so loudly by so few . . . I am sure that the powers that be pay very little

³³⁸Advertisement, "Why Not Industry & Agriculture Both?", *Taylor Daily Press*, Sept. 22, 1964, Box 692, File 5, Poage Papers

attention to petitions . . . I largely discount this, and hope you will do the same.³³⁹

Henry Fox sent Wells a friendly letter and attached a clipping of the newspaper ad. He gave Wells the background on the 1961 election that had overwhelmingly approved bonds for more than fifty earthen dams on the upper San Gabriel and its tributaries. The perfect solution, Fox suggested, was two big dams above Georgetown and a system of small flood prevention dams. If the Army could be persuaded, presumably by Wells, to abandon Laneport for such a plan,

. . . I'd be willing to bet the top calf from my herd against the top calf from my brother Howard's herd that Williamson County would unite on the plan overwhelmingly.³⁴⁰

It was a tongue-in-cheek challenge, referring to the fourth Fox brother, Howard, who years before had sold his inherited San Gabriel River property and moved to Hearne. (Howard had stepped down in 1963 as president of the Brazos River Authority, but he was still a director.) It might have worked a few years earlier. But Henry Fox's scheme failed to address the issue of potential water sales, which were critical to the BRA's future existence.

³³⁹Letter, Wilson Fox to Wells, Sept. 21, 1964, Box 59, BRA

³⁴⁰Letter, H.B. Fox to Wells, Sept. 22, 1964, Box 59, BRA

Wells forged ahead, requesting Williamson County municipalities to resolve to support the BRA's efforts to restructure the Army engineers' dam plan so that the water they banked would not be prohibitively expensive. Wells gave every incorporated city in Williamson County a boilerplate resolution and asked the cities to send them to the Corps of Engineers, the Texas Water Commission, the Brazos River Authority and to Congressman Pickle.³⁴¹ To his board of directors, Wells commented, "It looks like the pot is still boiling."³⁴²

Pickle came under intense political pressure from each end of Williamson County, but he did not waver. His response was markedly different from his predecessor's. Thornberry had agonized whenever controversy over the San Gabriel dams surfaced. He had tried to appease all factions. Pickle just kept pressing forward. "I hate to see this kind of public agitation because it is bound to come to the attention of the Corps of Engineers and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees," Pickle wrote Wilson Fox, referring to Henry Fox's full-page ad. "It should have no direct bearing on their decision but human nature being what it is, sometimes it does."³⁴³ Pickle had fought fiercer battles than Laneport dam (the death of his first wife, "Sugar," to cancer, for one), and the first-term congressman did not flinch.

³⁴¹Letter, Wells to R.F. Holubec, Sept. 16, 1964, *ibid*.

³⁴²Letter, Wells to W.E. Borger, Holubec, J. Howard Fox, etc., Sept. 24, 1964, *ibid*.

³⁴³Letter, Pickle to Wilson Fox, Sept. 25, 1964, BBQ, Pickle Papers

As the date of Pickle's first Hilda's Bottom barbecue at Wilson Fox's Riverside Ranch approached, Pickle's letters to Fox grew warmer. "When we first decided to go ahead with the barbeque, I had some reluctance," Pickle admitted, "but you folks know how to do things right and big. I'm very grateful to you for your effort and direction in this regard."³⁴⁴ From then on, the Pickle-Wilson Fox relationship grew more trusting, with the smoky flavors of Fox's wildly popular political party and his pet project, Laneport dam, merging into a quiet understanding between the two men.

On September 29, 1964, Hilda's Bottom rang with the sound of politicos and their courtiers having a good time. "Oh, man, I remember that party," Pickle said nearly forty later. "There weren't any better parties than Wilson Fox's — they were *that good*. There was always plenty of beer . . . It was billed as the biggest steak in Texas, but nobody cared. It was a chance for these community leaders across the district — all strictly men — to mix and mingle out under the trees, away from the cares of home. Some old boys would have too much to drink and

³⁴⁴Ibid.

sometimes it got a little wild and wooly. But in general, there were no problems out there. All was in harmony.”³⁴⁵

Well lubricated after the barbecue, Georgetown’s and Granger’s city councils cranked out the resolutions Wells wanted. Still, it was touch and go. “It was important to resolve,” said Pickle. “Granger and Taylor were split on having a dam at all. While I was talking to Taylor, whenever I thought I had something lined up, Georgetown rose up and raised hell. ‘You can’t build a big dam down there,’ they’d yell. ‘We’ll be ripped apart.’ People forget how ravishing the ’57 flood was. But what [Georgetown] was really saying was, ‘If Taylor and Granger gets one, we get one, too.’”³⁴⁶

It was Wells who broke the deadlock. Perhaps only a non-politician could have managed it. Just before Christmas 1964, Wells suggested that the Army engineers host a meeting in Austin on January 7, 1965, between three government agencies — the Texas Water Commission, Brazos River Authority and the Corps — to discuss the San Gabriel projects. No one else was invited. What Wells sought sounded simple, though it had eluded everyone else for fifteen years: “mutual understanding” between the agencies on the amount of conservation space for each dam on the San Gabriel River and (the political sticking point) their order of construction.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵Interview: Pickle, April 18, 2000

³⁴⁶Interview: Pickle, July 3, 1998

³⁴⁷Letter, Wells to J.A. Cotton, Dec. 15, 1964, Box 59, BRA

Wells was trying to rebuild shattered bridges. Two years earlier, the Texas Water Commission, egged on by Wells' own Brazos River Authority, had rejected the Army's 1958 resurvey recommendation to build Laneport first. The TWC had offered an alternative vision: three dams built simultaneously as an "inseparable" unit. The Texas Water Commission's fall-back position was that North Fork should be built first, South Fork second, and a vastly downsized Laneport third, if at all.

The Corps scoffed at that suggestion. There the matter lay, tattered, still contentious and therefore not likely to glean money from Congress. Even if Pickle could push the plan through, the now-revised projected cost of water was so high that the BRA was in the awkward position of having to renege on its old commitment.

Surprisingly, in Austin, the Texas Water Commission and Army representatives gave Wells what he wanted. Perhaps they were worn out by the controversy; perhaps they felt this was their last chance to dam the San Gabriel River. Unofficially, they agreed to kill the South Fork dam project but supported building North Fork and Laneport simultaneously (Sherrill's magic word again) at "optimum yields" that would lower water costs to BRA water users. The skeleton of the final deal was in place.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸"Summary of Conference," Texas Water Commission, Jan. 7, 1965, *ibid.*
The optimum yields were estimated at 25, 20 and 10 cfs for Laneport, North Fork and South Fork, respectively.

But Pickle had to make it work politically. He was the only man who could convince Williamson County that the dams would work for, not against them. It helped that he supported water development, period, and honestly believed that in Texas, the value of conserving water in reservoirs far outweighed any individual sacrifices.

In early April, while attending an Austin banquet, Pickle quizzed Wells about the water triumvirate's January meeting. Georgetown's Mayor Elliott, informed about the meeting through the grapevine, also asked Wells for an update. Wells later wrote Pickle:

I am convinced that there is no single solution which will satisfy everyone in Williamson County. There may be no single solution which will entirely satisfy even a majority of the people. But I do believe that the approach we are exploring offers the best possibilities for getting some reservoirs on the San Gabriels in the near future and meeting the needs and desires of the greatest number of people in Williamson County.³⁴⁹

Wells copied this letter to Georgetown's Mayor Elliott and to BRA Director Raymond F. Holubec of Granger, who owned three hundred and fifty acres of farm land a few miles below the

³⁴⁹Letter, Wells to Pickle, April 10, 1965, *ibid.*

proposed Laneport dam and strongly supported its construction. No one else in Williamson County was in the know.³⁵⁰

A week later, Pickle returned to Texas with a copy of Wells' letter tucked under his arm, intending to put it to use during the Easter break from Congress. As Pickle remembers, he came armed with a verbal commitment from Colonel Jack W. Fickessen, District Engineer for the Corps' Fort Worth District. He had asked Fickessen if the Army would agree to build North Fork and Laneport simultaneously.

"If you can justify them engineer-wise, I can get these Williamson County folks to cooperate," Pickle remembers saying. The Army man agreed, shifting the Corps of Engineers' negative position on the North and South Fork dams one hundred and eighty degrees.

Over Easter weekend, Pickle took on Taylor and Georgetown. Once he had joked about locking the competitive towns' leaders into a room until they agreed on a plan. He did not quite do that, but he came close. First he tackled Wilson Fox, who previously had stoutly resisted "simultaneous" construction of

³⁵⁰"Williamson County Tax Roll," 1964, p. 123; "Williamson County Survey," Tobin Map Co., San Antonio, Texas, p 36-37; Map 60741, Williamson County Appraisal District, Feb. 27, 2001, Georgetown

three dams. Fox succumbed. Pickle does not remember talking to anyone else on the Taylor side of the argument, probably because Wilson Fox *was* the Taylor side of the argument.

Then Pickle turned to the Georgetown crowd. He and an aide stuffed key Georgetown leaders — banker Grogan Lord, newspaperman Scarbrough and businessmen Charles Forbes among them — into two cars and drove around on back roads, while Pickle made his pitch, first in one car, then another. Then Pickle’s entourage pulled onto U.S. Highway 81 and stopped at a roadside park halfway between Round Rock and Georgetown.

“We stood under a grove of big old oak trees, and I asked if they would accept the plan. ‘If I can do this, you’ve got to give me your word you won’t go back on the deal,’ ” he remembers saying. They shook hands on it, and the deal was done.³⁵¹

A year passed. The government plodded through the process of squaring the new plan with the “locals” and Army engineers. The Corps drew up the plan and the BRA board approved it. A few “die-hards,” as Wilson Fox called them, peppered Pickle with objections to Laneport, not knowing that the fight was all but over.³⁵² An uneasy truce held in Williamson County.

³⁵¹Interview: Pickle, July 3, 1998, and April 18, 2000.

³⁵²Most potent among these was Sherrill, who never gave up his fight for South Fork dam, which along with North Fork, would, in his words, “create the most beautiful and outstanding recreation area USA wise.” See letter, Sherrill to Poage, Nov. 24, 1969, File 7, Box 692, Poage Papers

Clinching the Deal

It required another year to clinch the deal. On March 25, 1966, Pickle brought officials of the Corps of Engineers, Brazos River Authority, Texas Water Development Board and Texas Water Rights Commission back to the table in Austin. Again, no one from Williamson County was invited. An estimated fifty-five million federal dollars would flow to the county to build massive federal projects that would completely change the county's economies, cultures, landscapes and individuals, but the subject was still so volatile that local representation was not thought

wise. The agencies rubber-stamped the decisions they had informally made a year before: Laneport and North Fork dams would be built simultaneously and their yields would be reduced so their water “product” would cost less, though specific costs were not delineated. South Fork dam would not be built.³⁵³ The total estimated price of the San Gabriel dams had jumped twenty percent to \$55.5 million — thirty-two million dollars for Laneport and fourteen million dollars for North Fork.³⁵⁴ Real estate prices, buoyed by speculative investment along the new interregional highway, had risen, inflating the cost of North Fork dam.³⁵⁵

The agencies knew that even with South Fork dam eliminated from the picture, and even if the other two dams’ conservation pools were reduced, Laneport and North Fork water would *still* be “considerably more expensive” than any other Brazos basin reservoir — three times as expensive, to be precise.

³⁵³One person who did not attend the March 25 meeting was James A. Cotton, the BRA’s new chief consulting engineer. Repeating the Army’s view of the previous fifteen years, he wrote Wells that the proposed “approach” was the best available. However, he added, “Personally, I doubt that either the North or South Fork reservoirs are economically justified.” See Cotton to Wells, March 15, 1966, Box 59, BRA

³⁵⁴Letter, Col. Jack W. Fickessen to Texas Water Rights Commission, March 31, 1966, Table I (March 25, 1966), “San Gabriel River Preliminary Reservoir Data,” Box 692, File 6, Poage Papers. Though the South Fork dam looked dead, its \$9.3 million cost was included in the \$55.5 million package total. The Corps rarely removed any authorized public work from its books, figuring that if conditions changed, it would be far easier to build the project without having to go through a difficult re-authorization process. Ultimately, North Fork and Lakeport together cost \$100 million.

³⁵⁵Letter, Wells to James A. Cotton, March 14, 1966, Box 59, BRA

This worried everybody, since, even in 1966, no one believed Williamson County could ever need enough water to use the new supply. In Austin, one BRA man confidently predicted

. . . that there was, and would be in the future, very little demand for the water in the immediate vicinity of the proposed reservoirs.³⁵⁶

Apparently, no one questioned that assumption. Texas's chief water planners felt so certain Williamson County would remain a stagnant backwater that the Texas Water Development Board representative took the extraordinary step of suggesting that his agency "assume responsibility for making payments to the [federal] Government to the extent and at the time that the [Brazos River] Authority might be unable to do so . . ." ³⁵⁷

But why should it? Why did the State of Texas consider developing Williamson County water so important that its top water policy makers would suggest absorbing the Brazos Authority's bad debt? It was quite true that in 1966, Williamson County couldn't come close to utilizing the water stored by two new dams, even during extreme drought. And yet, Wells claimed the dams' purpose was ". . . simply to satisfy the desires of the people of Williamson County."³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶Memorandum, "Meeting on San Gabriel Projects," Wells, April 4, 1966, Box 59, BRA. Walter Wells, J. Howard Fox and Harry H. Moore represented the BRA at the meeting.

³⁵⁷Ibid., 2

³⁵⁸Minutes, BRA Board of Directors, April 18, 1966, p. 3831-3832, BRA

Clearly this was not the case: strong local contingents had fought both for and against each project. Texas water development forces wanted the dams for two overriding reasons. Dams at Laneport and North Fork would satisfy the occasional desperate need of powerful “downstream water interests” for vast quantities of fresh water that the BRA could not deliver with its 1966 system of reservoirs. These “interests” were two of Texas’s most important industries: Dow Chemical, the coastal rice farmers and the canal companies that supplied water to the growers.³⁵⁹ Both industries depended on copious amounts of fresh water for survival, and in a normal year the Brazos River proved ample.

But during the seven years’ drought of the Fifties, both Dow and the rice growers had experienced water shortages so dire they had threatened the industries’ survival. Developing new water reserves at Laneport and North Fork — where water apparently could *not* be utilized locally — was better than digging up buried gold. And, too, state and regional planners acknowledged they could not foretell distant future water needs. The San Gabriel reservoirs’ usefulness might not become obvious, as one of Texas’ chief water planners noted, until “some 40 to 50 years from now, and the [Brazos River] Authority should consider

³⁵⁹Letter, Alex Pope, Jr. to Lyndon Johnson, Nov. 9, 1956, Senate Papers, 1956 Case and Project, BRA, Box 1210, LBJ Library

whether at that time it would be better to be criticized for having too much water available or for not having enough.”³⁶⁰

In 1966, the Brazos River may have been considered something of a disappointment in the grand scheme of Texas development. One of Texas’s greatest river systems, it had somehow failed to become the agent for wealth that its sister river, the Colorado, had triggered, especially near Austin and the Highland Lakes. Seasonally the Brazos went berserk, flooding lowland plains so badly that Brazoria County billed itself as “the receiving end of Wild River!” and built its own dam to contain the river.³⁶¹ After the Texas Revolution, the Brazos Valley had lured many large investors, who established themselves astride its floodplain where the river crossed the Black Waxy. Cotton planters from the Old South, with slaves to work the fields, arrived first. Some pioneering entrepreneurs believed the Brazos could be made navigable from the Texas Coast to Waco, where the Black Waxy terminated; they believed the Brazos’s alluvial drifts would provide footing for an agricultural Colossus. The dream of ferrying cotton bales down the Brazos to ships waiting

³⁶⁰Ibid.

³⁶¹*Welcome To Brazoria County* (1957), State of Texas & Brazos River Authority, 1, Center for American History

in the Gulf died hard, but after several costly attempts at re-engineering the river, it was abandoned.³⁶² Nonetheless, the Brazos Valley provided a safe harbor for King Cotton well beyond the turn of the century (longer than in most traditional cotton-producing regions), making fortunes and establishing the most extensive rail system in the United States. But by the late 1920s, King Cotton was playing out.

Meanwhile, from 1900 on, aspiring rice planters were buying up thousand-acre farms south of Houston. On a strip of coastal plain roughly twenty to thirty miles wide, railroad promoters flogged rice-growing into existence, despite the need for large capital investments in irrigation canals, pumps and levees.³⁶³ Most of the planters came from moneyed stock, hiring out their land to menials who actually did the work. Some Japanese rice farmers were recruited to Texas. In 1911, in a fairly typical brochure, one railroad trolled for tenants, claiming, "It is not unusual for tenants to buy their own farms with the results of

³⁶²Hendrickson, 5-10. The historian of the Brazos River Authority traces the fascinating story of attempts to re-engineer the Brazos into a navigable stream.

³⁶³*The Texas Rice Book* (circa 1900), Gulf, Western Texas & Pacific Railroad's Southern Pacific Sunset Route, Clark Collection, Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas, 41. In 1900, the outlay required to start a rice farm ranged from \$50,000 to \$300,000, depending on the size of the operation, this promotional booklet asserts.

one year's work."³⁶⁴ It was an exaggeration, but some serious wealth was built on rice.

By 1966, when the Brazos River Authority was trying to boost dam-building on Brazos tributaries, rice was Texas' number three crop — and a very profitable one at that. Unlike cotton or corn, though, it needed prodigious amounts of fresh water precisely when the farmer called for it, and a simple but extensive irrigation system.³⁶⁵ A railroad pamphleteer described how it worked when the farmer opened his flood gates:

The rice farmer from this time until harvest begins has only to watch his levees and cry out, "Give me water, water," which he keeps up for about seventy days, the usual period of irrigation . . . ³⁶⁶

It sounded easy, but it wasn't, especially during drought years. In 1955, the rice growers pressured their political representatives, including Senator Lyndon Johnson, against doing *anything* that would interfere with their right to use precious Brazos River water — from building new dams on the river's main stem to raising the height of Possum Kingdom Dam, the Brazos River Authority's only significant source of income. The Brazos Authority's need to develop a new hydropower dam — a cash cow

³⁶⁴*Texas and Louisiana Rice* (1911), Passenger Department Sunset Route, Industrial Department, South Pacific Railroad Company, Houston, 19, Center for American History

³⁶⁵Ed., Marshall R. Godwin and Lonnie L. Jones, *The Southern Rice Industry* (1970), 5-7, Texas A&M University Press, College Station

³⁶⁶*Texas and Louisiana Rice*, 19

— and its directors’ belief in the “multi-bucket” system of river management warred with the state’s concerns about keeping the rice growers in business.³⁶⁷ Something had to give.

Spurred by World War II demands, another industry quickly dwarfed rice agriculture on the Texas coast. In 1940, Dow Chemical officials, pressed by the United States military to produce magnesium for the war effort, built a chemical plant on the mouth of the Brazos River at Freeport. Before long, Dow’s Texas Division was its flagship. The Gulf of Mexico provided Dow with the “tremendous” quantities of sea water its scientists needed to process magnesium. Once the magnesium was bathed in salt water, it needed a fresh water rinse. The Brazos River, neatly carved into two channels by the citizens of Brazoria County, fit the bill perfectly.³⁶⁸ A Dow company magazine writer elaborated:

The relationship of the Dow plants to the Brazos warrants something more than the usual recognition of the importance of a river in the functions of an industrial facility located snugly on its shores. . . This specification

³⁶⁷Memo, Walter [Jenkins] to Senator Johnson, March 21, 1955, 1956 Case & Project, Brazos River, Box 1210, LBJ Library

³⁶⁸Ibid., 4, 6, 8, 9-11

was met by taking ingenious advantage of the quirks of the old and new channels of the Brazos.³⁶⁹

In the early Forties, one of Dow's first orders of business was to secure rights to Brazos River water. In Texas, the state owns all water in its rivers and lakes, but people or corporations may lay claim to those waters. The state will permit them to use the water so long as no prior claim exists. The most desirable water rights in Texas are the claims made earliest in time and lowest in the river basins, along the Texas coast. Thus, the canal companies that supplied the rice growers had the "best" rights on the Brazos, but Dow held an enviable position, too. In 1942, the Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District, which became the Brazos River Authority, acting as the state's agent, signed a thirty-year contract with Dow allowing the industry to use up to one hundred and fifty thousand acre feet of water per year from the Brazos. The water was free. It was a great deal for Dow, granted, no doubt, because of the importance of the industry to Texas. There was a catch: If Dow needed more than one hundred and fifty acre feet in a year, or if the Brazos's flow could not meet Dow's contractual allotment, Dow could ask the Brazos district to release "emergency" water from Possum Kingdom Dam, four hundred miles upstream. Once that water reached Dow's pumping station, the emergency Possum Kingdom

³⁶⁹"From Salt Marsh to Chemical Center: The Texas Division," *Dow Diamond*, Oct. 1955, Vol. 18, No. 3, 4, Center for American History

water (mingled, of course, with water from downstream Brazos tributaries), would cost Dow one dollar per acre foot. Even that was dirt cheap. In addition, Dow paid the BRA fifteen thousand dollars a year to seal this “right.”³⁷⁰

In 1956, near the end of the seven-years’ drought, Dow made its first request for “emergency” water. At that point, Dow had only a twenty-day water supply from the Brazos’ shrunken mouth. Its two private reservoirs were drawn down to mud. Anxious memoranda flew around state offices. “Should Dow run out of water, it would be forced to shut down and disrupt seriously the economy of the Gulf Coast,” one bureaucrat wrote. There was no easy fix. Possum Kingdom, the theoretical back-up “bucket” in reserve, was drawn down to the nub, too. Even if every acre foot of water in Possum Kingdom Lake were released, Dow still wouldn’t receive enough water to keep operating. It was a pending disaster, not only for Dow and the Texas economy it fueled, but for the Brazos River Authority. “Such withdrawl from Possum Kingdom,” wrote one BRA official, “might make it impossible for the Authority to fulfill other prior contracts. In this event, the Authority might lose \$42,500 a year of income for several years.”³⁷¹ He did not add that the BRA could be forced to

³⁷⁰Contract, “Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District and The Dow Chemical Company: A Water Supply Contract,” Dec. 30, 1942, Box 362, BRA

³⁷¹Memo, “Helping A Neighbor In Need,” H.S. Hilburn to BRA board of directors, Dec. 1956, Senate Papers, 1956 Case & Project: BRA, Box 1210, LBJ Library

renege on numerous small contracts, potentially spawning dozens of lawsuits.

The solution turned on Lake Belton, a Corps of Engineers flood-control dam twenty miles north of Georgetown in Bell County. Open only two years, its water supply was untapped, so BRA officials adroitly turned a liability into an asset. They released Lake Belton's reserves to Dow, preserved the BRA's contracts with its other Possum Kingdom water users and theoretically saved thirty thousand acre feet of water that would have evaporated on the long trip from Possum Kingdom in north Texas to Dow on the Coast. The BRA even made money on the deal.³⁷² Lake Belton proved the allure of multiple dams within a major river basin run as one flexible unit. The success of Lake Belton during the 1956 Dow emergency warmed the hearts of Texas water managers, emboldening them to seek more dams and complex integrated projects.

Lake Belton taught another lesson: the utility of dams on relatively insignificant upstream tributaries where water was *not* in heavy demand. Such reservoirs could create transportable liquid pools for desperate situations in the high-priority downstream world of rice and Dow. As a BRA spokesman put it, "You could go to another bucket that was full — or fuller."³⁷³ This was the *sub rosa* reason the BRA made a case for two, or even

³⁷²Ibid., 2

³⁷³Telephone interview: Bukala, *ibid.*

three, dams on the tiny San Gabriel, and why the Texas Water Commission and national politicians like Lyndon Johnson and “Jake” Pickle backed them up. Sympathy for Williamson County and its flooding miseries were the cover story that helped sell the project, but by the Sixties, greater forces — Dow and the rice industry — were Texas policy-makers’ larger concerns.

But the policy-makers missed one trend completely: they failed to imagine how Interstate 35 would impact Williamson County. Though national patterns of suburban growth triggered by freeways had been materializing for well over a decade, the planners did not extrapolate those experiences to the new interstate’s path between San Antonio and Dallas. Between 1950 and 1960, Williamson County’s population had actually declined, from 38,833 to 35,044.³⁷⁴ In Williamson County, a handful of people saw that the combination of the new interstate and lake water might trigger big-time growth. Owen Sherrill was certain of it.³⁷⁵ But no one making water policy for Texas expected Williamson County to grow. If anything, the state’s professional fortune-tellers suspected it would shrink.

³⁷⁴Clara Scarbrough, *Land of Good Water*, 345

³⁷⁵Advertisement, “San Gabriel Hills,” Owen Sherrill Agency, Feb. 21, 1966, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

Pickle believed in dams. He had seen what Lyndon Johnson's string of dams on the Colorado River had done for Austin, and that was all he needed or wanted to know.³⁷⁶ Certain he was correct, Pickle wrapped up two decades of battling over San Gabriel dams by imposing on Williamson County a "compromise" solution crafted by government technocrats and okayed by a few chosen local "leaders." To get that agreement, Pickle deliberately avoided informing or involving those most affected by the proposed dams until the "deal" was done.

Williamson County was brought into the picture on April 29, 1966, at a carefully choreographed affair. Pickle billed the Austin meeting as a chance to hear a "preliminary pre-construction planning and engineering report" on the San Gabriel dams. His invitation list was short: the mayors of Georgetown, Taylor and Granger along with County Judge Sam Stone. He asked each man to limit his party to a dozen people. Congressman Poage would bring "a car load of Cameron people."³⁷⁷ Corps, BRA and Texas water agency officials would be on hand to answer questions. What Pickle, Wells and Colonel Fickessen feared was a discussion flaring into controversy, so they prepared a press release to be

³⁷⁶This should in no way imply that Pickle had not educated himself about dams; he attended learned conferences and sought information constantly from experts in the field. But he came at the issue with his aims firmly fixed, applying his considerable knowledge and skills toward achieving them. See his speech at "Seminar on Management of River Basins," April 5, 1965, at the University of Texas at Austin.

³⁷⁷Note, Pickle to Poage, April 19, 1966, with attached form letter also dated April 19, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers

distributed at the meeting. The point was to freeze into official policy the unofficial agreement between the three key government agencies and the half-dozen county leaders Pickle had wooed, while discouraging “local interests” from jousting and derailing the project.³⁷⁸

They need not have worried. The mayors and the county judge picked attendees for their polite disinclination to “make waves” while television cameras rolled. Sherrill was the only real danger, and he could not be left out. So at the meeting, Pickle approached Sherrill with the sort of back-handed flattery that only someone with an ego like Sherrill would enjoy. Sherrill boasted about the incident in a letter written several years later:

There was a time and a meeting called at Austin by Jake . . . when Jake picked me from a back observation seat, set me down on the front row and said, “Owen ____ ____ don’t you say a word.” This was when North Gabriel and Laneport were placed in the program leaving out the lonesome South Gabriel dam . . . ³⁷⁹

Amity reigned. Newspaper reports reflected the meeting’s cheery glow. “Gabriel Dams Are Assured,” the *Williamson County Sun* headlined, and, topping an editorial, “Yippee! We’ll Get That Dam!!”³⁸⁰ Pickle and Wells congratulated each other, though Wells

³⁷⁸Letter, Wells to Pickle, April 20, 1966, with attached press release, dated April 29, 1966, Box 59, BRA

³⁷⁹Letter, Sherrill to Poage, Nov. 24, 1969, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers

³⁸⁰*Williamson County Sun*, May 5, 1966

made sure Pickle got public credit. “This was *your* baby — so I know you were doubly proud,” Pickle jotted to Wells.³⁸¹

The perception of unanimity was far stronger than the reality — a smoke and mirrors trick — but it worked. Poage, always the pessimist when it came to Williamson County, fretted that county residents might not “stay hitched” to the deal, remembering how one agreement had fallen apart in 1962. Pickle worried about getting appropriations for two dams on one river in Lyndon Johnson’s 1967 budget. But for the first time in twenty years, on the subject of dams, Williamson County stayed mum.³⁸²

Early that autumn, Pickle celebrated with twenty-five hundred followers at the Tenth’s stag “whingding,” as Wilson Fox and Roman Bartosh dubbed it, down at Hilda’s Bottom. The company feasted on two thousand steaks, plus three hundred servings of sausage, grilled by the Zimmerhanzas. They drained sixteen kegs of beer. At nine o’clock, the skies opened and it rained “like mischief,” in Pickle’s words, giving party-goers a taste of the thunderstorms that could turn ugly on the Black Waxy. Afterwards, *The Granger News* shouted, “Holy Mudballs, Super

³⁸¹Letter, Pickle to Wells, May 2, 1966, Box 59, BRA

³⁸²Letters, Pickle to Wells, May 2, 1966, and May 14, 1966, *ibid.*, Poage to Wells, May 21, 1966, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers

Pickle it Rained!”³⁸³ Hundreds of cars and trucks got stuck in the fabled black “gumbo”; it took a week to haul them out.³⁸⁴

“As to the liquid,” Wilson Fox later reported to Pickle, with uncharacteristic jocularity, “[I] will say that the final consumption sounds somewhat like the national debt . . .

The beer boys tell me that there are about 3 1/2 cups to each quart; and then by continuing the mathematics we learned in school, we find that there were some 10,528 cups of beer consumed. If we want to really get into the mathematics, we can say there were 10,528 trips to the kegs, varying anywhere from two feet to 100 feet of travel distance; and by a little more multiplication we can find out about how many miles people walk to get the beer. However, we might have to drop that somewhat as quite a few of them never moved out of their tracks which were imprinted very close to the keg. There was another type of liquid on the ground I believe known as soda water, but the amount consumed there pales into insignificance as compared to the more potent beverage All I can say is that you really do have some beer drinking friends.³⁸⁵

Forever after, Pickle referred to Wilson Fox as “My Beer Friend.”³⁸⁶

³⁸³“Holy Mudballs, Super Pickle it Rained!” *Granger News*, Sept. 8, 1966. Pickle liked this piece so much he passed it around the House of Representatives; “holy mackerel it was good,” he wrote Don and Clara Scarbrough. See Pickle Papers, *ibid.*

³⁸⁴Interview: Pickle, April 18, 2000

³⁸⁵Letter, Wilson Fox to Pickle, Sept. 14, 1966, Taylor BBQ 1966, Box 95-112/107, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

³⁸⁶Letter, Pickle to Fox, Sept. 19, 1966, Pickle Papers, *ibid.*

The deal stayed “hitched.” In October 1967, less than three years after he entered Congress, Pickle pushed a \$1.8 million appropriation through the labyrinth of lawmakers to start construction on Laneport and North Fork dams — the first real money the project had ever garnered. President Johnson signed it into law just after Thanksgiving.³⁸⁷ Taylor and Georgetown never stopped haggling. “Both cities suspected each other,” Pickle said. “We had to promise we’d start the two dams at the same *hour!*”³⁸⁸ But except for deep discontent among one hundred and fifty-two farming families, whose forced departure was necessary to make way for Laneport dam, the opposition collapsed.³⁸⁹ Pickle’s

³⁸⁷“Dam Funds Get ‘Okay’ From House,” *Williamson County Sun*, July 27, 1967; Letter, Wells to Pickle, July 28, 1967, Box 59, BRA; “Senate Restores ‘Start Money’ for Dams,” *Sun*, Oct. 5, 1967; “President Johnson Signs Bill,” Nov. 30, 1967, *Sun*. The final appropriation contained \$1.5 million for the San Gabriel projects, mostly for land acquisition. President Johnson signed the Appropriation Bill for Public Works on Nov. 27. See letter, Pickle to Oxsheer Smith, Dec. 6, 1966, Box 59, BRA

³⁸⁸Interview: Pickle, July 3, 1998

³⁸⁹There was a great deal of anger and bitterness, especially among the Czech landowners near the Laneport dam site, not only about being forced to abandon their family homes, but also at the “horsetrading” mentality they encountered in the Corps. The Laneport Basin Landowners Association formed to bolster landowners’ spirits in the face of the overwhelming power of the United States government, promising to help defray court costs for anyone who believed the Corps had “lowballed” its first offer. “These landowners aren’t just haggling over the price of a horse, they’re dealing against their will over their life’s work,” read an undated article in the *Taylor Daily Press*. But this was not unusual for Corps’ dam projects, as has been well documented in Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert* and a meticulously documented study by Gordon L. Bultena, “Dynamics of Agency-Public Relations in Water Resource Planning,” in *Water and Community Development; Social and Economic Perspectives* (1974), ed. Donald

compromise had spilt the opposition, forcing Georgetown to back off its support of the Czech farmers if it wanted dams on the North and South Fork.

In the summer of 1970, the U.S. House of Representatives appropriated four million dollars — more than President Johnson had requested — for dam construction on the San Gabriel. It was a tough time for dam appropriations: Americans were deeply torn over the Vietnam war, questioning the government in a way it had not been questioned since before World War II, and environmentalists were stopping some Corps' dam projects. Pickle's feat of securing critical start-up funds on dam projects that had been contentiously disputed for twenty years was practically miraculous. The BRA's Wells, an experienced Corps hand who knew the process well, was stunned. He wrote Pickle,

It is most unusual for the House to add anything to the President's budget. This is the first time I have ever had it happen on any project I've been associated with. It is rare indeed, and getting it done is a great tribute to your ability and effectiveness as a Congressman. I don't know how you did it, but you deserve all the credit.³⁹⁰

It was true. For all practical purposes, Pickle dammed the San Gabriel River. He willed it to happen, manipulating his constituents into compromises that made them squirm. Pickle

R. Field, James C. Barron, Burl F. Long, Ann Arbor Science Publishing, Ann Arbor, Mich.

³⁹⁰Letter, Wells to Pickle, June 22, 1970, San Gabriel, BRA

closed in fast on the San Gabriel imbroglio, shrugging off the doubts, snares and entreaties of dam supporters and opponents alike, from Owen Sherrill to Wilson Fox. Without Pickle's 1965 "oak tree" talk, it is hard to imagine Congress financing any dam on the San Gabriel River. In truth, local opposition to Laneport ran as deeply as ever, despite Pickle's "compromise."

Across the nation, resistance to American military forays in Vietnam was stiffening, eroding support for President Johnson's domestic programs, while opposition to large federal dams was starting to swell. In early 1966, the Bureau of Reclamation started work on two Colorado River dams that would have flooded the Grand Canyon, triggering a wave of outrage that led to a paradigm shift in the politics of environmentalism. Almost immediately, Congress pulled the plug on the Colorado projects and passed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, ensuring that lawmakers would consider rivers as precious resources.³⁹¹ The American public was disgusted with projects like the proposed Marble and Bridge Canyon dams, and in Texas the fearsomely expensive Texas Water Plan was defeated at the polls.

Had Pickle not broken the San Gabriel River logjam when he did, the dams almost certainly would not have been built. The San Gabriel River would still be flowing freely, drawing whitewater canoeists to its rapids during the spring and fall, enriching the Black Waxy's alluvial deposits in Williamson and Milam counties,

³⁹¹Reisner: 243, 273-274, 285-288

periodically flooding out the “bottom” lands along the river valley. Lake Georgetown would be an engineer’s schematic tucked away in the National Archives, instead of the reason Round Rock exploded in the early 1970’s, growing into a mecca for the nation’s burgeoning computer industry, and turning Williamson County into the second fastest growing county in the United States.

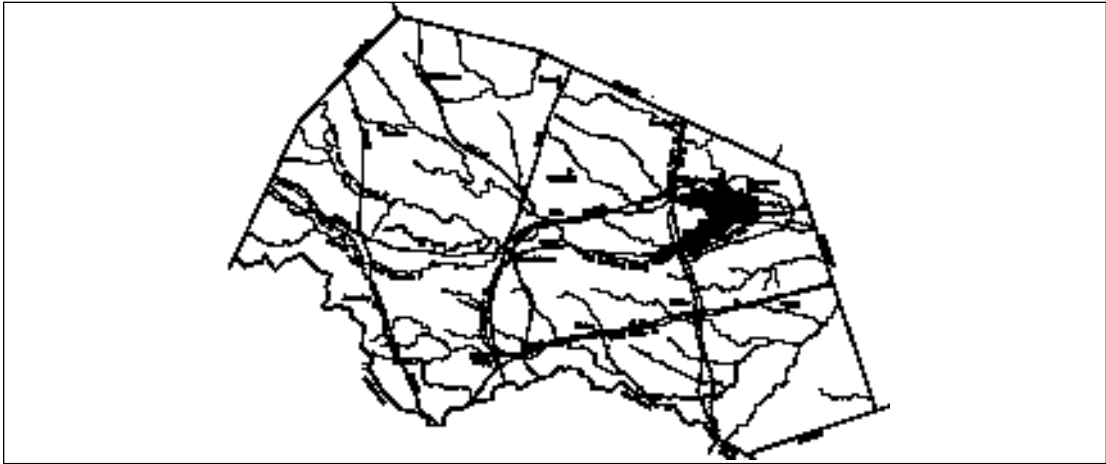


Figure 23: Corps of Engineers' 1948 San Gabriel River Laneport Dam plan.



Figure 24: Owen Sherrill's plan to dam the two forks of the San Gabriel west of Georgetown.

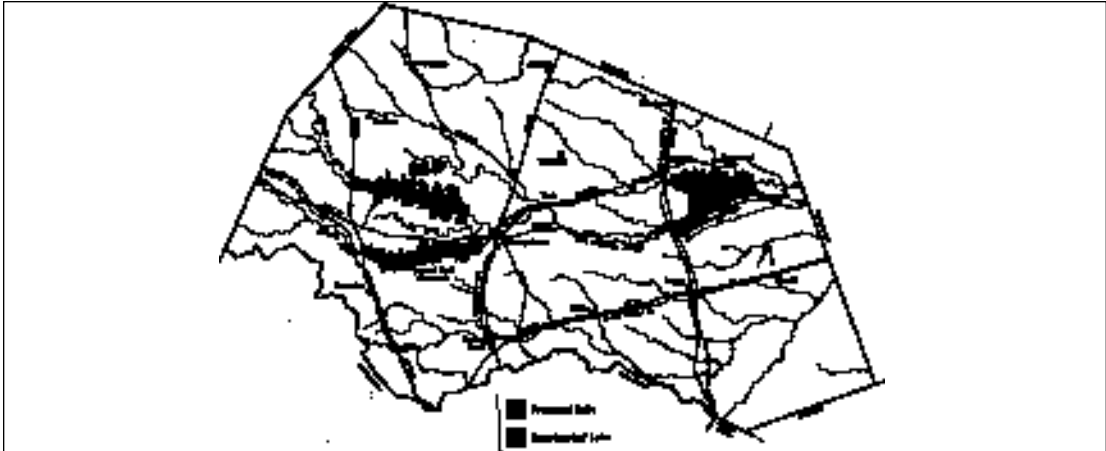


Figure 25: The Pickle "compromise" plan — three dams as a unit, circa 1965.

9

Diaspora

After nearly three decades of deadlock, the Army engineers were unleashed to dam the San Gabriel River.³⁹² The “compromise” agreement to build three dams on an inconsequential stream was far from the Corps’ “ideal” plan, which favored one reservoir at Laneport, but it was better than nothing. All the Army had to do now was acquire land from mostly unwilling sellers, withstand legal challenges and maintain its momentum in Congress’s annual appropriations grind. The San

³⁹²Surely this was one of the longest-delayed projects ever resurrected in Army Corps of Engineers history.

Gabriel “compromise” still might founder on the shoals of an increasingly vexatious Vietnam conflict, but if the Army engineers and the politicians stayed their course, their power of eminent domain was nearly invincible. A government attorney underscored this point as he took the Corps’ real estate operatives to task over their negotiating tactics at the Laneport dam site:

. . . from the fact of the relative strength of the United States Government and the individual property owners . . . it seems only fair that the property owner be told as much as possible about the means employed to arrive at value.³⁹³

In Williamson County, one hundred and fifty-two farm families, approximately five hundred Czech-Americans, faced a shattering *diaspora*.³⁹⁴ As once they had sown seeds to the wind, they were now being blown from their lodgings like seedpods in a storm. Fearing expensive legal battles which their congressmen advised them against making, most families whose farms lay in the way of the dams accepted settlements they considered insulting — a word that appeared frequently in protests.³⁹⁵ Few of the Czechs had ever negotiated a major real estate deal, much

³⁹³Letter, William C. Black to Woodrow Berge, May 23, 1969, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 7, Waco. At this stage, the politicians who had led efforts to build the dams sometimes interceded with the Corps when it appeared that a land owner might be getting a raw deal. And yet, the crucial politicians, Poage and Pickle, continued to defend the overall acquisition process as fair.

³⁹⁴Interview: Loretta Mikulencak, July 6, 1998, Granger

³⁹⁵Letter, Poage to Labaj, March 15, 1972, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers

less one that captured their entire life's work. Some spoke English haltingly; others were widows with sparse business experience. Most had inherited or purchased their land from friends or relatives, while the Army's land men were hardened professionals — they knew the “takings” game by heart. Usually, the Army's advance land men would start with the least experienced — or most desperate — land owners controlling crucial segments of the project. If the land owner refused the Army's first offer, and negotiations failed to produce a settlement, the Army could sue and let the court decide. Or, it could keep dickering and settle with holdouts as needed. It was a pragmatic approach, designed to save taxpayers' money and impress congressional penny pinchers. But the fact was that many small land owners suffered greatly, particularly those who settled early with the government. Those who resisted the Army did far better, in some cases netting nearly four times as much per acre as land owners who agreed to the Corps' first offer.

Over the years, the Army had honed its response to land owners' pleas of inadequate compensation: as an institution it tended to view property owners as greedy whiners, and hopelessly anti-progressive. It was a view the Army successfully proselytized in Congress, allowing the people's elected representatives to feel a little better about the forced dispossessions of their constituents. Just as Native Americans had been stripped of their choice hunting and fishing grounds when

the United States “opened” new territories to new waves of “progress,” the descendents of many of Williamson County’s earliest entrepreneurs — the European immigrants who had possessed the vision and backbone to cultivate the rich Black Waxy — had to give up the land, homes, and even the communities they had developed to a government goal they barely comprehended.

In 1830, Congress had passed the Indian Removal Act, allowing the Army to relocate eastern Native American tribes to points west of the Mississippi River. On the Trail of Tears, between 1830 and 1840, seventy thousand Indians marched to Oklahoma — their compensation package, one with little value at the time. In 1970, Williamson County’s agrarian land owners affected by the Corps of Engineers’ dams also received government compensation: “market price,” the Army called it, though few believed it. It was not the Trail of Tears, but most of the farmers and ranchers who lost their land to make way for “progress,” as the Indians had lost theirs before them, could hardly have been more shattered if the government had shipped them, en masse, to Alaska, where a lifetime of agricultural skills acquired on Texas’s Black Waxy and Edwards Plateau ranch land would prove laughably useless.

No matter. They had to leave. A few fared well; many did not. Unable to purchase comparable land with their government settlements, since there was no land comparable to the Blackland

Prairie, many of the ousted Czech farmers “retired” to Granger and Taylor, where they eked out their days working at low-status jobs as school custodians and mail carriers, stripped of the land that was their proudest possession. The things they prided most — their cleverness at manipulating the Black Waxy to their will, bounteous home gardens and intricately grafted orchards — were bittersweet memories.³⁹⁶ Gone, too, were Friendship, Machu and Moravia, where two or three generations of Bohemian, Moravian and German children had been educated in the American way of life.

Generally, the ranchers who gave ground for the San Gabriel’s North Fork dam fared better than their counterparts near Laneport. There were several reasons for this. First, only a handful of families still actively ranched the San Gabriel’s North Fork Valley, and most of them had been preparing themselves for the prospect of a dam for fifty years.³⁹⁷ By contrast, approximately one hundred and fifty families had to leave their farms for Laneport dam. Unlike the ranchers, they had believed the project dead after the “little” dams project had seemed to

³⁹⁶Donald R. Field ed., *Water and Community Development; Social and Economic Perspectives* (1974), Ann Arbor Science Publishing, Ann Arbor, Mich.

³⁹⁷Depending on how one tightly defines the word “family,” the count ranged from five active ranch clans to ten. See “Tract Register,” U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, North Fork Dam, undated; and “N. San Gabriel Dam & Reservoir above Georgetown,” *Williamson County Sun*, June 16, 1966, Section III.

prevail.³⁹⁸ Second, the ranchers owned much larger spreads — a thousand-plus acres — compared to the typical hundred-acre Blackland Prairie farm. After the government “took” what it needed for North Fork reservoir, the ranchers still retained large chunks of real estate to sell, develop or run cattle on. If they wanted to start fresh on comparable land, they could. But for the Czech farmers, there was nothing like the Black Wax. If it could be found, it was impossibly expensive. Third, the ranchers came from a trading culture. A lifetime of buying and selling livestock prepared them nicely for dealing with the government’s land men. Fourth, now that the ranchers’ scenic, hilly “waste” land was going to overlook a lake, it was becoming desirable Central Texas real estate, especially in light of the new interstate highway, three miles away. Finally, while the affected ranchers were no keener to leave their homes than the farmers on the opposite end of the county, the ranchers did not cling to a common cultural heritage, as did the Czechs. Hence, the ranchers, for whom movement had been a defining pattern, could easily imagine themselves in new places.

³⁹⁸It is not clear precisely how many families were dislodged from active farming by Laneport dam. One hundred and fifty families was the number most often cited by forces opposed to the dam, but the number cited ranged from 125 to 200. The Corps’ final audit of the project named 180 separate individuals owning property large enough to support a farm, plus several corporations and cemeteries. Tenant farmers worked some of the 15,303 acres “taken” for the dam, but in this Czech stronghold, tenancy was rare compared to the rest of Texas’ Blackland Prairie.

Williamson County business leaders thought that the San Gabriel North Fork lake would resemble the lakes along the Colorado River that had sparked a real estate boom in the Hill Country west of Austin all the way to Marble Falls, seventy-five miles away. Bankers and real estate speculators believed North Fork Dam would pay handsome dividends, so they started sinking financial capital into the area. Prices quickly rose.

Not so around the Laneport dam site. For farm families facing dispersal, the economic forecast was grim. The five or ten acres they might retain after the Army engineers finished assembling their reservoir site would be useless for farming. Nor did the flat, treeless Blackland Prairie suggest vacation homes or horse farms, despite Ralph Moore's dreams.

What the Czechs loved about the Black Waxy was the fact that they *owned* it. They had planted roots that had grown deep and strong, forming an intricate web of schools, church life and social customs harking back to Moravia and Bohemia and evoking sentimental memories and intimate attachments between pioneer families. After choosing the uncertainties of frontier Texas over the Hapsburg Empire's caste system and spending several decades climbing the ladder to social acceptance and political dominance in eastern Williamson County, these Czechs — there were almost two thousand of them in a triangle roughly bounded by Granger, Laneport and Taylor — hated breaking their bonds with the soil that had sustained them so well.

Anastasia “Stacy” Mikulencak was born in 1903 on a farm founded by her mother’s parents, the Zarskys, near the hamlets of Moravia and Machu, between the San Gabriel River and Willis Creek south of Granger. She was the fifth of ten children. When Stacy reached school age, her parents moved to Granger so she could attend “superior” schools. But Stacy loved visiting her Grandfather Zarsky’s farm. It seemed a slice of heaven, like Willa Cather’s fictional Nebraska farm that the young Bohemian Åntonia created in *My Åntonia* — an oasis of fruit trees, serenity and civilized husbandry.³⁹⁹ At the Zarskys’ farm, peach, apricot and mulberry trees shaded the front yard; beehives bulged with honey. A cottonwood towered over the front porch, making delicious shimmery sounds whenever a breeze stirred; a big garden produced sumptuous vegetables, including Old World kohlrabi and poppy seed.⁴⁰⁰ Like Åntonia, Stacy explored the creeks and river bottoms, deciphering Nature’s signs and remnants of departed settlements. Of an abandoned school she wrote “. . . nothing remains . . . except a plum thicket which

³⁹⁹Willa Cather, *My Åntonia* (1949), Houghton Mifflin, Boston, p. 339-342

⁴⁰⁰Ben A. Merrick (Mikulencak), *Granger Farm* (1990), unpublished manuscript, chapter 4, p. 4, owned by Loretta Mikulencak, Granger



Figure 26: Granger's Czech-Moravian Brethren ministers.



Figure 27: Stacy and Henry Labaj

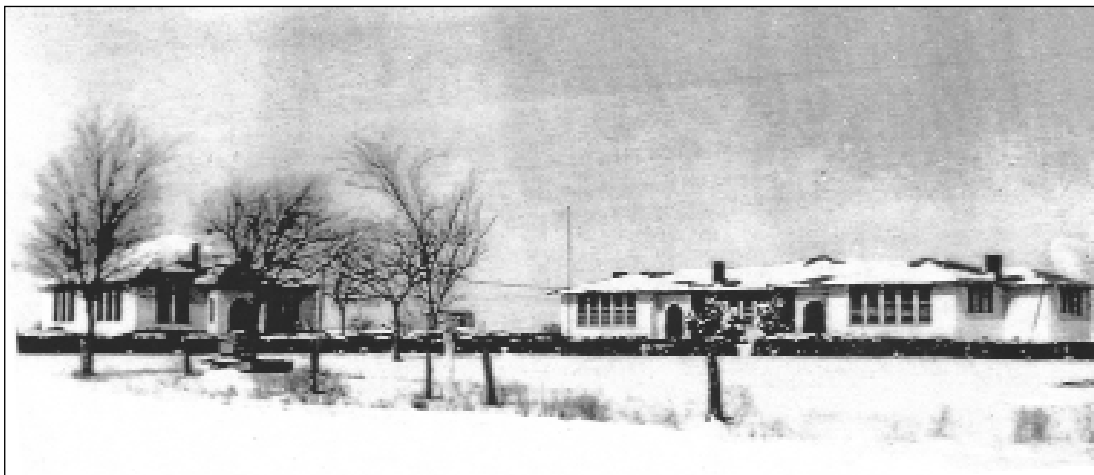


Figure 28: Friendship schools. The building on the right was built after the 1921 flood for the Friendship Fair. The site is now under Lake Granger.

sprang up from the countless plum pits that were spit out; the thicket indicates the exact location of the once lively school. The bluebonnets were knee high and the native grasses were shoulder high to the school kid . . . This was a lush, fertile land.”⁴⁰¹

Before they moved to town, the Mikulencak children quivered at night as wolves howled from the thickly wooded river bottoms. They quailed at Grandfather Zarsky’s tales of “Old World demons, devil-like riders in the night, dark and sinister castles, blood-thirsty bandits, eerie lights dancing over shadowy marshes” — a vanished European mythological landscape.⁴⁰² Like other neighborhood families, the Mikulencak family practiced the Old Country custom of *Na Jozefka*, during which local “Josefs” were serenaded under glowing Japanese lanterns, while friends sang traditional songs to accordion music, drank beer and nibbled steaming fresh *kolaches*. On special feast days, the men and woman dressed in Bohemian or Moravian costume, but otherwise they blended in with their German, Anglo-American, Swedish and Wend neighbors, adopting the latest American scientific farming practices with enthusiasm and dilligence.

Like many of her friends, Stacy Mikulencak spoke only Czech until she started first grade, but she graduated from

⁴⁰¹Stacy Labaj, *Friendship, Texas*, unpublished manuscript compiled between 1966 and 1972. Owned by Loretta Mikulencak, Granger. The school Labaj described was located at Enterprise, which existed from 1900 to 1922, when it consolidated with Friendship, according to Clara Stearns Scarbrough in *Land of Good Water*.

⁴⁰²Merrick, *supra.*, chapter 4, p.9

Southwest Texas State University with honors in voice and art.⁴⁰³ She taught briefly at the Moravia School but quit after she married Henry Allen Labaj and started a family. During the Depression and World War II, the Labajs lived on Henry's parents' farm, scrimping to buy their own place. Stacy wrote a chatty column for the *Granger News* and collected histories of the Czech community that dominated her landscape. In 1946, she and Henry purchased one hundred and fifty acres of what she liked to call the "renown" Blackland Prairie between the old Moravia School, Machu Cemetery and Friendship. Two years later, they were stunned to learn that the Army Corps of Engineers planned to flood their land with an elephantine lake that for most of its expanse would be less than ten feet deep.

In Stacy Labaj's world, the fact of being Czech, her "fabulous" Blackland soil and the San Gabriel River were inexorably linked. In 1963 she interviewed Frank Machu, whose father established the Moravia School. "The children were not bilingual by any means," Machu told Labaj, recalling when a teacher encouraged a sixth grader to read along with him. "Honey, this says 'Run, Rover, run,'" the teacher intoned. To which the student

⁴⁰³Much of this section is drawn from an interview with Stacy Labaj's daughter, Dorothy "Dot" Daniel, June 12, 2001, Round Rock, Texas. Of Stacy Mikulencak's siblings, one became a physician who served in the 56th Evacuation Hospital in North Africa and Italy and later wrote a history of Baylor University; two were registered nurses, two were teachers, and two were businessmen. Two sisters married Moravian Brethern pastors, deeply involving the Mikulencak family with this branch of Czech Protestantism.

replied, “Honey, this says ‘Run, River, run.’ ”⁴⁰⁴ For Stacy Labaj, the river held together everything important in her life — family, language, customs, the farm, landscape.

When the Army first announced it would dam the San Gabriel River at Laneport, Stacy and Henry Labaj — along with most of Williamson County — were incredulous. It had to be a mistake. They could not believe that the United States would eliminate a thriving farm community working the most productive non-irrigated land in Texas.⁴⁰⁵ Initially, they thought if their elected representatives and the Army engineers were made aware of the facts, they would not allow such a calamity.

A month after the Army’s November 1948 announcement, Stacy Labaj waded into the fray. In the Christmas edition of *The Granger News* she reported that “Mr. Minzenmayer was railroaded into playing the Santa Claus for the local small fry — it was so sudden and unexpected he hardly had time to adjust his personality to match the flowing beard and the bug eyes . . . ” Then she switched topics, arguing that productive agricultural

⁴⁰⁴Frank Machu, interviewed by Stacy Labaj, January 28, 1963, S.P.J.S.T. Rest Home, Granger, Texas, in an unpublished fragment of her history of Friendship. Family papers owned by Dorothy “Dot” Daniel, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

⁴⁰⁵Throughout the 1950s, the anti-Laneport coalition repeatedly claimed that the land to be flooded by the government consistently produced between \$1 million and \$1.5 million a year. It is difficult to establish how accurate that claim was, but one credible source, Joe Zimmerhanel, who owned the general store at Circleville, agreed that the land to be covered “is easily producing \$1,000,000 a year in cotton, corn, maize, pecans and cattle . . . ” See Pickle Papers, BBQ, Zimmerhanel to Pickle, Sept. 5, 1964.

soil, an increasingly scarce commodity, must not be destroyed. The U.S. government had preached this message and funded soil conservation programs as a result of the 1933-37 Dust Bowl years, after the great “plow-up” of the Great Plains and the dust storms that followed.⁴⁰⁶ Labaj’s piece built on the lessons learned from that ecological disaster:

That is why we feel so strongly against submerging our rich lands If there were no alternative, we would let our land go . . . however, there is an alternative . . . two smaller dams in the cedar brakes and waste hill country of Georgetown Since Georgetown is eager to have these dams, and since the harm it will do there is inconsequential as compared to the vast yearly loss it will create here, it is sheer short-sightedness to fold one’s hand and let criminal damage be inflicted.⁴⁰⁷

Stacy Labaj was a traditional Czech-American woman who always signed her name “Mrs. Henry Labaj.” She took pride in her ability as a clever seamstress and good cook. It took courage, she confessed to her family, to speak out at public meetings.⁴⁰⁸ But she did, repeatedly. Amid the thousands of letters politicians received protesting the Army’s plan for Laneport dam, hers shimmer with eloquence. Though she was not an “important” constituent, like Wilson Fox (or Wilson’s brother, Henry), or

⁴⁰⁶Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl* (1982), Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, pp.30, 34-35, 42-43, 182-230

⁴⁰⁷ “Friendship Facts,” Mrs. Henry Labaj, *Granger News*, Dec. 23, 1948

⁴⁰⁸Letter fragment, Stacy Labaj to family, undated but undoubtedly Sept. 15, 1964, held by Dorothy “Dot” Daniel.

Owen Sherrill or Taylor's Virginia Forwood Lawrence, whose father founded the Morning Glory Mattress empire, Labaj's congressmen took pains answering her letters.⁴⁰⁹ Here Labaj addresses Poage:

I regret but feel urged to say you seem not to realize that the passage of the Laneport Dam project is like snuffing out our lives. Perhaps you have come easier by your livelihood, but to us our farm is the product of our labor of our entire married life plus the share received from both sides of our parents as inheritance. . . . [O]ur children grew up treasuring a nickle, we made clothes over from out-moded styles and fresh fruit was a delicacy; to hold on to insurance to insure an education for our children was a real struggle Acquiring our farm seemed almost too good to be a reality A wisely located dam protects rich lowlands, this dam would destroy the rich productive valley . . . it is against all laws of good judgment. ⁴¹⁰

As the Laneport dam controversy flaired, family tragedy struck. In 1963 Stacy's daughter Joy died of a brain aneurysm.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹*Welcome to Taylor* (1994), Alma Lee Holman ed., *Taylor Daily Press*, p. 71, Taylor, Scarbrough, *Lane of Good Water*, p. 238; *Taylor and its Opportunities* (1940), Taylor Chamber of Commerce, p.18-19, Williamson County Scrapbook, Center for American History. In 1946, the Taylor Bedding Company, maker of the Morning Glory Mattress, claimed it was "the world's largest bedding plant." The U.S. military was one of its biggest clients. After a post-war disagreement over cotton waste price controls, the conflict was resolved in the company's favor with the assistance of Congressman Lyndon Johnson. Johnson aide Walter Jenkins did the "grunt" work and received a Morning Glory mattress as a "token of our appreciation," a Taylor Bedding official wrote. House Papers 1937-49, Container 282, OPA Taylor Bedding, L.D. Hammack to Jenkins, Oct. 29, 1946, LBJ Library

⁴¹⁰Letter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Labaj to Poage, Nov. 3, 1954, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 3, Waco

⁴¹¹Daniel, *ibid.*

Labaj pressed on, penning dozens of letters to politicians and organizing petition drives. In 1964, she recommended that Congressman Pickle read historian Walter Prescott Webb on the importance of preserving good soil. She stated publicly what Wilson Fox and his allies hated to see in print: Taylor “will make another slide toward a ‘has been’ if they succeed in their clamor to destroy these 16,000 acres . . . ”⁴¹²

After an unsettling meeting in 1964, she privately fumed to her daughter,

The Army Engineer talked long and holy and as tho’ the thing is irrevocably settled — tho’ several thin places shone thru; two of the greeds from Brazos River Authority gave their little smart alec speech . . . I pointed out we in Friendship are an industry — the thing all small towns are eagerly trying to acquire — and its one and a half million dollar gross annual income helps Taylor-Granger business in way of tractors — cars — food — clothing — schools — churches etc. We need no artificial aid such as irrigation to produce fabulous yields . . . Perhaps by their coolness we can judge we won an edge on them . . . tho’ victory is far away and elusive.⁴¹³

But in another note, she despaired, “Even Granger is determined to cut its own throat for a possible boat ride over our farm; some of our friends are quite cool to us because we resisted putting our heads on the block so they could have a little

⁴¹²Letter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Labaj to Pickle, received March 23, 1964, Pickle Papers, Center for American History, Austin

⁴¹³Letter fragment, Stacy Labaj to unknown, not dated but undoubtedly written Sept. 15, 1964. Ibid.

fun. Ignorant people. It will be death blow to Granger.⁴¹⁴ By that time, Congressman Pickle was stitching together his “compromise solution,” though neither Stacy Labaj nor anyone else in the county knew it.

By 1970, the fight against Laneport dam was over. The Labajs, like most of their neighbors, simply wanted what they considered a fair price for their precious farm, boasting topsoil sixty feet deep. The Army wanted one hundred and nineteen of their one hundred and fifty acres, including their rose-covered farm house. The Army offered the Labajs four hundred and forty dollars an acre — \$52,360 for the whole works.⁴¹⁵ The Labajs declined. The Army condemned the Labajs’ property, but allowed Stacy and Henry to rent their own house. For a year, the Labajs paid. Then they stopped paying rent. The Army threatened to evict them. The Labajs wanted six hundred dollars an acre — ten thousand dollars more than the government’s top price.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴Letter fragment Labaj to unknown receiver, not dated, but probably September 1964. Hulubec was a director of the Brazos River Authority. Ibid.

⁴¹⁵Letter, Colonel Floyd H. Henk to Poage, March 14, 1972, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 7, Waco

⁴¹⁶Ibid.

Stacy Labaj appealed to Congressman Poage. “We are truly weary of this demeaning haggling,” she wrote, “and cannot comprehend how one arm of the law states a party must be reimbursed at market value for any property thus taken while another arm of the government rides rough shod over these same parties

This is truly unreal especially in view of the fact this dam will serve no good purpose, there is absolutely no need for it Mr. Poage, do be so kind and take time to correct this wrong to make a call in our behalf. My husband has developed an ulcerated stomach from all this, the neighbor to the east of us suffered a heart attack and the one to the west of us, a mild stroke which left after effects.⁴¹⁷

Finally, the Labajs bowed to the inevitable. They accepted the Army’s “final” offer of five hundred and twenty-one dollars an acre, ten thousand dollars less than they considered their property worth, and moved to Granger.⁴¹⁸ Stacy Labaj compiled a history of Machu Cemetery, which the reservoir would soon cover, for the Corps of Engineers. In 1976 she was helping decorate floats for “Granger Days” when she felt ill and went home, suspecting the flu. Soon afterwards, she died of pancreatic cancer.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷Letter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Labaj to Poage, March 8, 1972, Poage Papers, Box 692, File 7, Waco

⁴¹⁸“Granger Lake, Texas,” Audit #Ft W-2-008, Index, Tract Register, Aug. 14, 1978, Department of the Army, Fort Worth District, Corps of Engineers, Vol. 1, National Archives, Fort Worth

⁴¹⁹Daniel, *ibid.*

Some of Stacy's Labaj's closest friends blamed Laneport dam. "We always thought she died because of it. She fought it for twenty years, and when she had to leave her home, she grieved and grieved. It tormented her," said Loretta Mikulencak, Granger's school tax assessor-collector. "The Corps offered certain people high dollar for their land, but everyone was at their mercy. The chief damage to Granger was getting those [Czech] families out of here; they were stable farm families who had inherited their land and they were not going to leave. They never recovered . . . they just died, one by one. And the worst of it was that it made us bitter; it made us what we weren't. It made us different people."⁴²⁰

The Labajs' \$521 per acre did not come close to the top price paid for a large chunk of Laneport dam land. That price was \$750 an acre, which went to Lee and Virginia Forwood Lawrence of the Taylor Bedding Company fortune. The Lawrences had fought the Corps of Engineers in court and walked away with a \$268,553 settlement.⁴²¹ Ironically, one of the lowest prices paid

⁴²⁰Interview: Loretta Mikulencak, July 6, 1998, Granger

⁴²¹"Granger Lake, Texas," *ibid.* CA A-73-CA-132. The Corps "took" 358 acres of the Lawrences' land, a portion of which was planted in a pecan orchard, which generally was more highly valued than row crop land. The case concluded on Jul. 9 1973.

per acre for for Laneport land went to Texva Realty, Ralph Moore's company that had acquired land in the area before the Corps announced its plans to build Laneport. In one of the earliest sales, Texva sold two tracts to the U.S. government for \$392 per acre, apparently the lowest price paid for a substantial amount of land at the Laneport site.⁴²² After Moore died in 1971 and his widow liquidated the corporation, Gabriel Farms, which took over the assets and debts of Texva Realty, sold 166 acres to the Corps for \$837 an acre — apparently the highest price paid at the Laneport dam site.⁴²³

The Fox brothers — Wilson, Henry and Bryan — presented a thorny problem to Corps appraisers. Obviously their properties were not comparable. Nor were they. If Wilson Fox did not actually create Laneport Dam, as some of his neighbors believed,

⁴²²It appears that Texva sold cheap because it had to — it was in dire financial straits, *ibid.*, Vol 4. Moore's 1946-48 land acquisition program resulted in Friendship Farms, Inc., which in 1957 could not pay its franchise taxes. The company evolved into Texva Realty, Inc. with Thomas Sully partnering with Lois and Ralph Moore. After Moore died, Texva again fell into arrears and was liquidated by Lois Moore and her board of directors on the advice of Frank Scofield, the powerful former director of the Internal Revenue Service and old friend of Lyndon Johnson's. On August 14, 1972, Texva conveyed title to all of its land to a new partnership named Gabriel Farms, formed by Granger banker and former Texva director G. Truett Beard and his wife Pauline Beard (trustee for George Beard); Glen D. and Martha Katherine Chilek of Austin; and Paul L., Frank E. and Alice K. Scofield of Austin. Ralph W. Moore's wife, Lois, owned no portion of Gabriel Farms.

⁴²³*Ibid.* Gabriel Farms settled its business with the Corps in two segments, on May 1, 1974 and Oct. 1, 1975. The first group of sales averaged \$473 an acre; the second \$830 an acre, proving the folk wisdom that says it is better to hold out when facing government condemnation.

he was the driving force behind it — not only its most influential “local” supporter but also the architect of several key maneuvers that kept the dam plan alive when it had seemed hopelessly moribund.⁴²⁴ The Army “took” 313 acres of Fox’s Riverside Ranch, including Hilda’s Bottom, leaving him his handsome home and more than a hundred acres. Henry Fox had been Laneport’s most serious adversary, along with the Owen Sherrill-led Georgetown dam coalition. Henry Fox had led ongoing grassroots campaigns against Laneport dam and for the “little” dams on the San Gabriel, successfully freezing Laneport’s prospects for sixteen years. The Army condemned 182 acres of Henry’s land, including a pecan orchard whose trees he had planted and grafted himself, but his house and another 190 acres lay safely out of the reservoir’s reach. Bryan Fox was a likeable educator and fiery public speaker who had sent his son Paul to Harvard and loved throwing parties at his beautiful home, which sat high on a bluff facing south above the San Gabriel River. He would lose his entire place — house, swimming pool, pecan orchard and 94 acres. Like Henry, Bryan Fox had stoutly opposed Laneport.

How could the Army reward Wilson Fox for his long-time support without appearing churlish toward Wilson’s recalcitrant brothers? Wilson Fox’s sudden death in February 1974 may have

⁴²⁴Wilson Fox “worked” the Brazos River Authority so artfully that its managers often conferred with him alone in Williamson County on important policy matters, as if he presided over the BRA’s board of directors like his brother, Howard Fox, had at one time.

resolved the problem. Before Wilson's death, the Army had agreed to pay Bryan Fox \$700 an acre for his property.⁴²⁵ It had also concluded two civil actions against Henry Fox, resulting in an award of \$636 per acre for 69.56 acres, with the price of another 112.7 acres still to be determined in the courtroom.⁴²⁶ After Wilson Fox's death, Hilda Fox settled with the Corps for \$679 an acre for 313.61 acres. Shortly thereafter, Henry Fox's last parcel was condemned for \$761 an acre, bringing his overall average per acre sale price exactly in line with Bryan's — to \$700 an acre.

In the end, Wilson Fox's estate received less per acre for land crucial to Laneport Reservoir's development than the brothers who tried to stop the project. Had he lived, Wilson Fox almost certainly would have negotiated a loftier settlement. His legal and political value surely would have rendered him a higher price for Riverside Ranch. But it didn't turn out that way. Wilson Fox went to his grave bitterly resenting his brothers' actions on Laneport Dam, but their land fetched more than his.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵Civil Action A-73-CA-51, "Granger Lake, Texas," *ibid.*

⁴²⁶Civil Action A-73-CA-194, *ibid.*

⁴²⁷"Granger Lake, Texas," Vol 1, *ibid.* After Laneport dam was a "done deal," Wilson Fox started setting up arguments for a high settlement in several letters to Pickle, including one on Sept. 9, 1966: "There certainly is a peculiar situation existing when a man is forced to give up his property for the good of all concerned. I think we should not hesitate to make this sacrifice but at the same time should not be penalized for it. In other words, the public as a whole should bear the burden as money compensation is about the only compensation." On Nov. 27, 1967, he noted "I know no one wants to hold up anyone, but at the same time land is selling at a high price, and where a person gives up his land for the good of the country, then it is only right that he be paid a fair price." His thoughts anticipated the property rights movement of the

As a young man, Roy Gunn ranched on Hamilton Creek, a fingerling feeding the Colorado River in Burnet County. In those days, before the Highland Lakes replaced the Colorado through much of the Texas Hill Country, that was all one could do in the eroded hills west of the Balcones Escarpment. A successful rancher controlled access to water, and Roy Gunn had accomplished that goal. He and his wife Maggie Lee (“Bob” to friends and family because she had “bobbed” her thick curly hair first among her set) ranched with passion and steered their children on that course.⁴²⁸

Then, starting with Buchanan Dam in the 1930s, a string of six dams were built on the Colorado, ramrodded by the brilliant Texas attorney-lobbyist Alvin J. Wirtz and his protégé, Lyndon Baines Johnson.⁴²⁹ In the 1940s, the Lower Colorado River Authority took most of Roy Gunn’s land for Wirtz Dam and the “greater good.” Today, part of Gunn’s first ranch lies under Lake

1990s triggered by environmental regulations that lowered land values. See Pickle Papers, Box 95-112/107, Center for American History.

⁴²⁸Interview: Pat Gunn Spencer, Sept. 2, 2001, Georgetown

⁴²⁹Bill McCann, *State of the River* (1993), Lower Colorado River Authority, p.13, 31, Austin. For background on Wirtz, see Robert Caro’s *The Path to Power*.

LBJ; the rest became part of Horseshoe Bay, a luxury development of condos and second homes.⁴³⁰

Gunn did not relish leaving his friends in nearby Kingsland, but he hunted around for a new ranch. In isolated west Williamson County, he found one — two thousand acres along the San Gabriel River's North Fork. The Gunn family moved there in 1947. Tate, the eldest son, studied agriculture at Texas A&M. Pat, the only Gunn daughter, loved books, horses and the San Gabriel River. Sam, the charismatic younger son, spent his teenage years drinking, romancing girls and riding rodeo broncos. All the Gunn children envisioned ranching as part of their lives.⁴³¹

On March 5, 1968, the Corps of Engineers announced its land acquisition program for North Fork and Laneport dams. The decision seemed final.⁴³² That year, Tate Gunn visited Australia and liked what he saw. On his recommendation, “Bob” flew to Queensland to scout the territory after her husband got “cold feet.”⁴³³ On March 4, 1971, Roy Gunn sold the Army five hundred and ninety-three acres of choice river bottom land for one hundred and eighty thousand dollars — three hundred and three

⁴³⁰Spencer, *ibid.*

⁴³¹Linda Scarbrough, “A Tale of The Gunns,” *The Sunday Sun*, March 23, 1986, Georgetown

⁴³²“Opposition to Laneport Dam Aired At Georgetown Hearing,” *Temple Telegram*, March 6, 1968, undated file, Master File, Brazos River Authority, Waco. Also in the file were articles from the *Austin Statesman* and *Taylor Press*.

⁴³³Telephone interview: Tate Gunn, Sept. 4, 2001, Rockport, Texas

dollars per acre.⁴³⁴ He still had fourteen hundred acres left, most of which he later sold to an Atlanta development firm and a Dallas businessman.⁴³⁵ Gunn reinvested his government money in a “station” — an Australian ranch fifty times larger than his old Williamson County place — in a North Queensland rain forest. The station was called Kirrama, after the nearby Kirrama mountain range.

By 1973, Roy and “Bob” Gunn had assembled their entire clan in Australia: Tate and Barbara, Sam and Christine, Pat and Jim Spencer and all three couples’ children. The Gunn headquarters was the 1889 Kirrama homestead, as romantic as its name. In 1986, after a brief visit, I wrote,

Kirrama, the Aborigines called it. Even the name rings of magic. Sitting on the veranda of his family’s homestead near the top of a mountain in North Queensland, Australia, Sam Gunn gestures toward the lush green paddocks falling off in successive waves below the house. “We’ve got 100,000 acres, or 166 square miles, and 5,000 to 6,000 cattle,” says the youngest son of Roy Gunn⁴³⁶

It looked like Shangri-La. At twenty-four hundred feet, the air crackled with Alpine crispness; streams rippled through emerald paddocks and joined the Herbert River which feeds

⁴³⁴“North San Gabriel Dam-Lake Georgetown,” Audit #FT W-2-0010, Real Property Title/Historical Files, May 4, 1990, Department of the Army, Fort Worth District, Corps of Engineers, National Archives, Fort Worth, Tx.

⁴³⁵Spencer, *ibid.*

⁴³⁶Scarborough, *ibid.*

Blencoe Falls, plunging three hundred feet down a granite gorge. Blencoe Falls was the most spectacular spot in Herbert River Falls National Park, which bordered on the Gunn property. Riding shotgun in a jouncing Ford Bronco, I took notes:

Teetering on the edge of a large boulder, hanging onto a solid-looking tree, you look straight down into a giant Christening — tons of water pounding on granite rocks 50 feet tall. It is cubism gone mad, Picasso sculpting a strange work of art that laughs at nature. Standing there, one is so moved by the spectacle, this flying buttress of space, that the wish to soar out over the falls is almost irresistible.⁴³⁷

Unfortunately, Kirrama was not the paradise it resembled. The Gunns worked brutally hard to keep up with their cattle, hiring “Jackaroos” and “Jillaroos” during mustering, or round-up, season. There was no electricity. The closest schools were three and a half hours away; Pat and Barbara taught the children at home. But the family buckled when “Bob,” the family’s steadily beating heart, died in 1974, barely six weeks after arriving at Kirrama. Roy and Sam were off on a cattle-buying trip. Pat thought the root cause was stress: “The kids were all fighting. Mom died trying to keep all the men in our family happy.”⁴³⁸ Medical help did not arrive in time. “Bob” Gunn, who had seemed uncomfortable in Australia, was buried in a little cemetery at Cardwell, overlooking the Coral Sea.

⁴³⁷Ibid.

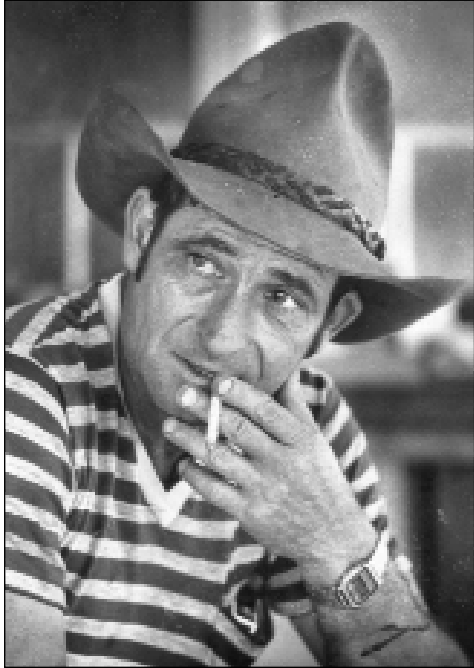
⁴³⁸Spencer, *ibid.*

The Gunns fell apart. Tempers frayed. The station could not support four families; Kirrama was draining the Gunns' estate. Pat moved back to Texas. Tate and Barbara sold their share of Kirrama and purchased a station on the Coral Sea. Sam ran Kirrama, hoping his family could somehow hang on. Tate thought Kirrama impractical, but he acknowledged that it suited his dad. "He can ride on a motorcycle or a horse without using a gate until his butt gets sore," Tate said in 1986.

He can carry a scope pistol — a .221 Remington Fireball with single shot bolt action — and shoot 'roos to feed to the stock dogs. He shot 60 once; they were a plague. He can shoot wild pigs, or dingos once in a while. He can . . . ride until he wants to come home, and he's never left Kirrama. How can a man like that be satisfied with 2,000 acres?⁴³⁹

But a year later, the Gunns sold Kirrama. They made money, but it was a heartbreak. Sam and Christine bought a "small" fifteen thousand-acre station, Minerva Hills, in Central Queensland. Tate and Barbara abandoned their "croc-infested" river by the Coral Sea and bought the Suntan Motel in Rockport, Texas, where Tate guided fishing trips on the Gulf of Mexico. Pat operated a canoe retail and rental store on the Blanco River near Wimberly. Still searching for another ranch, Roy Gunn moved in "temporarily" with Pat. "He wouldn't buy another ranch because my mother wasn't here," Pat said. "He could never get

⁴³⁹Scarborough, *ibid.*



Figures 29, 30: Sam Gunn, Aussie. His father, Roy Gunn, pulls a grandchild through the San Gabriel River at what is now Georgetown's intake system.



over the price of land, and he couldn't replace his carrying capacity anywhere in Central Texas." At 91, Roy Gunn died in a car accident while driving to an H.E.B. grocery store in San Marcos.⁴⁴⁰

Kirrama Station vanished. The original homestead was disassembled and moved to another property. The place is now a popular camping and picnic spot on the itinerary of numerous "survivor," birding and eco-tourism treks through North Queensland. During Mark Burnett's 1997 Eco Challenge Australia, contestants rappelled up Blencoe Falls. Sam and Christine Gunn live at Minerva Hills and say they will never leave. "I love this place; it's very quiet," Sam said. Since he emigrated to Australia thirty years ago, Sam Gunn has returned to the States just once, for his father's funeral. Pat settled in a Georgetown suburb and produces outdoor adventure videos. Tate and Barbara are selling the Suntan Motel. "I can't decide what to do," says Tate. "It's either Homer, Alaska, or Belize. We've also thought about Port Mansfield — it's pretty much unchanged."⁴⁴¹

A Georgetown banker and old family friend, Jay Sloan, believes Roy Gunn's forced exodus from Williamson County was a boon for his family. "Roy Gunn had two fortunate things that

⁴⁴⁰Telephone interview: Sam Gunn, Sept. 5, 2001, Minerva Hills, Australia; Tate Gunn, Spencer, *ibid.* "Carrying capacity" is a term used by ranchers to define how many "units" of livestock a piece of land can feed and water without danger of overgrazing and erosion.

⁴⁴¹Port Mansfield is a fishing village near the tip of South Texas, facing the Laguna Madre from the mainland.

happened in his life: his land on what became Lake LBJ was condemned and he sold it for more than it was worth. Then, fifteen or twenty years later, the same thing happened again at Lake Georgetown,” Sloan said.⁴⁴² Of course, Sloan’s analysis focused on the financial picture.

Thirty years after the U.S. government changed the trajectory of their lives, Roy Gunn’s children view the consequences of losing their Williamson County ranch differently. “I think it’s kind of simple,” Tate said. “I went to A&M and majored in animal husbandry but we would have starved to death if we had stayed [in Williamson County]. That was the life Dad and I wanted to live, but there was no money in it. And so we had a chance to ranch big over in Australia — *really* big — big enough for all the family.” The experience cost the family money,

but I wouldn’t trade any of it for our trip. There was just one bad thing about going over there. When we came back, I haven’t been satisfied, even though this is the best country in the world.⁴⁴³

Sam has become Australian. “He’s as happy as a tick on a dog,” says his sister. “I kind of lucked out,” he agrees. “Minerva Hills is lovely.” His and Christine’s children are nearby. And yet, he says,

⁴⁴²Interview: Jay Sloan, Nov. 8, 1999, Georgetown.

⁴⁴³Tate Gunn, *ibid.*

In the end, it split the family. Everybody had to survive out of one checkbook. My Dad, working with him . . . it was difficult. Sometimes I loved him and the next minute I hated him. He was a fine fellow but he wanted everybody under his thumb.⁴⁴⁴

Pat still bristles at the loss of the Gunns' San Gabriel River ranch. "We got a check from the Corps for \$176,000," she remembers. "But Dad ended up in a tight cash bind and he *had* to sell the rest [of our land] to pay for Kirrama. We didn't choose to sell." With her finger, she traces the photographic images of a family frozen in time, cavorting in a river, framed by limestone boulders that rear up out of the water like totems. The photo shows First Booty's Crossing on the San Gabriel, on the edge of the Gunn Ranch. First Booty's was the most popular of four low-water bridges that crossed the San Gabriel's North Fork, where thousands came to fish, swim, picnic and enjoy outdoor parties. The family in Spencer's picture was hers. Pat's boys, Mike and Jack Spencer, splash water at Tommy Gunn, Sam's eldest son. Roy and "Bob" Gunn's inner tubes are stuffed with children. Today, First Booty's sits underneath Georgetown's municipal water treatment intake structure. "There is nothing I have that I wouldn't trade for that land," Pat says. "Money in the bank means nothing. I would rather have had my sons out there on that river

⁴⁴⁴Sam Gunn, *ibid.*

for another twenty years. I'm the one in the family who needs roots, and I don't have roots."⁴⁴⁵

Indeed, the Gunn Ranch, once an integral "place" giving meaning to a cultural geography ruled by ranchers who defined social and economic norms at the rough edge of the American West, was piecemealed into disparate bits that suggest its immediate past far less than the change that occurred when Anglo-American settlers displaced Comanches and Tonkawans. Today, part of the Gunn place lies underneath Lake Georgetown. Part of it has become portions of public parks featuring a man-made beach, barbecue pits, boat ramps and camper sites.⁴⁴⁶ The rest is Fountainwood Estates, a prestigious Georgetown subdivision, where a small swatch of Roy Gunn's old ranch, including a custom-built house, fetches up to one million dollars.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵Spencer, *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶Jim Hogg and Russell Parks, Lake Georgetown's two most popular parks, attracted what the Corps tallied as 3,963,249 million visitor *hours* in 1993.

⁴⁴⁷Interview: Glenda DuVose, Sept. 19, 2001, Georgetown. Fountainwood Estates itself is subdivided into four separate sections of homes, ranging from a fairly typical upper-middle class neighborhood where homes start at \$190,000 to a "gated" community where five-acre lots are the norm and homes are marketed at just under \$1 million. Across the road from Fountainwood Estates is Del Webb's Sun City Texas, an age-restricted planned community projected to grow to a population of 19,000.

Roy Gunn sold too fast. True to its general operating procedure, the Corps dealt with Gunn early, since he controlled a critical piece of land needed for North Fork Dam. And though the Army's price — \$303 an acre — added up to a fat check of \$180,680 for Gunn, other ranchers parlayed their cedar-choked hills into considerably larger fortunes.⁴⁴⁸ A year after Gunn sold, for example, Judge D.B. Wood, who forced the Army to take him to court, received \$836 an acre for 301 acres.⁴⁴⁹ One more year passed, and as a result of another civil action, Carl E. Allen got \$1,024 an acre for his 359-acre tract. And three brothers — James, Jerry and Rex Hawes — all of whom owned land at the tail end of the reservoir, waited out the Corps with spectacular results. In 1974 the Hawes boys, as they are known locally, collected \$1,124, \$1,142 and \$1,154 per acre, respectively, for the land the Corps “took” — nearly four times Roy Gunn's selling price.⁴⁵⁰

Without conducting an exhaustive geographical and financial analysis, which would require a separate study, it is

⁴⁴⁸“North San Gabriel Dam,” *ibid.*, In this tract register, the breakdown of each tract number sold to the Corps shows the Army settling with Gunn on March 4, 1971 for a total of \$180,680. This closely agrees with Pat Gunn Spencer's recollection that her father received a check from the Corps for \$176,000. However, on the tract register's summary page, the “total value” of the Gunn property was listed at \$108,680 — which can only be a typographical error on the Corps' part.

⁴⁴⁹Letter, D.B. Wood to Poage, Aug. 24, 1971, Poage Papers. Judge Wood wrote Poage to congratulate his taking Williamson County into his congressional district, and mentioned that he and the Corps were “squabbling” over the price for his land.

⁴⁵⁰“North San Gabriel Dam,” *ibid.*

impossible to conclude whether or not the Army equitably treated owners of the approximately twenty-two thousand acres of land the engineers needed for Laneport and North Fork dams. From a close examination of the Corps' records, however, several signposts stand out. First, those who contested the "taking" of their land or held out longest against settling with the Army received substantially higher prices than those who did not, despite advice to the contrary by anxious constituents' elected representatives. Second, politically connected land owners, or those with strong legal representation, garnered higher land prices than their neighbors. Whether this relatively powerful group owned superior land, or whether political clout made the difference, or whether some owners traded more sharply than others is impossible to say. But the available evidence suggests that the latter two factors — political-legal connections and horse-trading ability — boosted the Army's "best" offer more than the intrinsic value of condemned land.

If this is indeed the case, the Army's claim that its condemnation proceedings were based on the fairest possible formula — "market value" — was simply not true. If government "takings" of hundreds of tracts resulted in some property owners receiving two, three or four times as much as others for similar land, the democratic system, as Stacy Hajda so eloquently suggested, was terribly out of kilter.

Eventually, the U.S. government spent \$8.1 million to purchase 15,303 acres for Laneport dam, an average \$532 per acre. For the North Fork dam project, it paid \$2.5 million for 6,300 acres, an average of \$390 an acre. Obviously, the “fabulous” Black Waxy soil counted for more than the sorry “waste” land of the Balcones Escarpment, but not as much as the Blackland Prairie farmers had expected.⁴⁵¹ Riverfront property usually fetched a higher price than its off-river counterpart.⁴⁵² Beyond those two givens, though, the only conclusion one can safely reach is that some land owners deftly stretched the standard “takings” formula in their favor, and others didn’t. Precisely how they managed it remains murky, but in Williamson County, Texas, the Army Corps of Engineers did not condemn property on behalf of the U.S. government with an even hand — even if the surrendered land was taken for society’s “greater good,” as Wilson Fox always insisted.

⁴⁵¹In the year 2001, Black Waxy land owners still refer, with contempt, to land west of the Balcones Escarpment — land that has boomed in value through the last three decades — as “that sorry old caliche stuff.”

⁴⁵²This generalization works better when applied to the Laneport dam “takings” than at North Fork dam, where Roy Gunn’s land bordered the river but Judge D.B. Wood’s land did not; the judge received \$836 an acre compared to Gunn’s \$303.

Selling the Water

In September 1967, the Brazos River Authority's directors bet the agency's economic life on a scenario sketched by their regional planning team.⁴⁵³ Encouraged by cheap Federal interest

⁴⁵³These planning experts completely missed the possibility that Round Rock might grow, despite the fact that it lay close to Austin, on the path of Interstate 35, and in close proximity to potential water sources. It was not until Round Rock leaders invited themselves to meetings in 1964 and later requested information about water supplies that the BRA and state water planners noticed the city's existence. Round Rock, of course, became one of the most dramatic growth stories in Texas during the 1970s, when the city's population burgeoned from 2,800 to 15,000. As late as 1967, BRA Manager Walter Wells predicted that "most of the water" from Laneport and North Fork dams would serve the "growing industrial area of Brazoria, Galveston and Fort Bend Counties" — an assertion that proved dead wrong. See letter, Wells to Fleming, Dec. 20, 1967, Box 257, BRA

rates that encouraged new dams for future water supplies throughout the American Southwest, the directors guaranteed that the BRA would pay all construction costs related to water conservation, or storage — forty-four percent of a total projected cost then estimated at \$46.5 million — for the San Gabriel River dams.⁴⁵⁴ There was a hitch. If the BRA failed to sell the water it “owned” in the new reservoirs, it would take a horrendous financial hit. As one of the BRA directors put it back in 1964, well before the San Gabriel dams upped the ante, “We have run our necks into a \$24 millions noose.”⁴⁵⁵ Since the BRA brass did not believe that Williamson County’s water needs could make a dent in North Fork and Laneport’s supplies, the directors’ gamble was a gutsy — some might say foolhardy — move.

In such a manner, on dams much like those planned for the San Gabriel, the Brazos River Authority had accrued a colossal debt in exchange for congressional financing of the flood control portions of dams throughout the Brazos watershed, bestowing

⁴⁵⁴The U.S. government fronted the money for the water conservation, or storage, portion of flood control dams built by the Corps of Engineers at low interest rates — between 2.5 and 3 percent in the Fifties and Sixties. Local governments, such as the BRA, borrowing under these terms had ten years from the time a dam was declared “finished” for water conservation before it started making payments, which were not supposed to exceed 30 percent of the total cost of the project. The cost of Laneport and North Fork dams eventually reached \$100 million. See memorandum Aug. 13, 1964, Chief Engineer Burke G. Bryan, Box 59, BRA; *Water Resources Development in Texas 1995*, U.S. Court of Engineers, 15-16; “Engineers to Acquire Land for Williamson County Dams,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 6, 1968

⁴⁵⁵Provence to Pickle, *ibid.*

massive plumbing projects on the San Gabriel, Lampasas, Leon, Bosque, Aquilla and Yegua tributaries — nine huge public works projects in all. These nine dams collectively cost \$333 million; the BRA's water conservation share varied from project to project, but ultimately reached one hundred million. It was the most extensive joint “local” and Federal dam-building effort ever mounted in Texas, save for the Trinity River watershed, where in cooperation with the Trinity River Authority the Corps built a system of dams and channels designed to protect Dallas and Fort Worth from floods, leaving the Metroplex awash in surface water supplies and electrical power.⁴⁵⁶ The Corps' final Brazos dams — North Fork, Laneport and Aquilla Lake north of Waco — represented the last flexing of political muscle that drove the United States' great dam-building era of the Fifties and Sixties, characterized by critics as “log rolling” and “pork barrel.” This in turn helped spark the rise of an anti-dam environmental movement, at almost the same time that Laneport and North Fork dams were completed.⁴⁵⁷

To a great degree, what followed in Williamson County regarding the San Gabriel River dams, both politically and

⁴⁵⁶*Water Resources Development in Texas 1995*, 11-19, 77-92. The Colorado River basin also boasts an extensive system of dams, but most of these were built with Federal funds funneled through agencies other than the Corps of Engineers. The Trinity River Authority-Corps projects were extensive, but two of them, built in the 1980s to satisfy water and power needs of Dallas, drove costs to staggering heights — \$618 million for Joe Pool Dam, completed in 1986, and Ray Roberts Dam, completed in 1991.

⁴⁵⁷Reisner, *ibid.*, 307-331

bureaucratically, was fired by that 1967 bet on the “come” — the BRA directors’ optimism that by the time they had to start making payments to “Uncle,” their stored waters would be turning a tidy profit. Thus was the BRA committed. It could not turn back. It *had* to make North Fork and Laneport dams work, whether that meant convincing Corps engineers to alter the architecture of their dams or “playing God” with the future of cities by withholding or selling them water. To succeed, the BRA had to adapt to a rapidly evolving demographic landscape in Central Texas, making sure that San Gabriel reservoir water was priced low enough to sell and inducing or discouraging potential customers to buy it based on what the BRA thought their ability to pay would be.

This was not simple math. In 1964, BRA engineers had realized with horror that the Corps’ proposed San Gabriel dams would result in outrageously expensive water — water costing about twenty dollars an acre-foot from North Fork Reservoir, for example. At that time, water from other Brazos basin reservoirs was selling for one dollar to six dollars an acre-foot. Throughout the process of finding a political solution that would allow the dams to go forward, no one had noticed.⁴⁵⁸

From 1967 on, most Williamson County people saw the continuing dam saga as a purely local cluster of issues: individual

⁴⁵⁸Memorandum by T.B. Hunter, assistant general manager, BRA, Aug. 12, 1964, Box 59, BRA

land owners' struggles to maximize compensation for their property lost to the government's power of eminent domain, presumed loss of a significant agricultural economy and what that might mean to Taylor and Granger versus the promised economic miracle that the lakes were supposed to bring, the surprising aggressiveness of tiny Round Rock's battle to acquire reservoir water, and a last-ditch environmental battle against North Fork dam.

Crucial to the eventual outcome was an invisible struggle between the two cooperating water bureaucracies, the BRA in Waco and the Corps in Fort Worth, which played out in a series of memoranda, letters and computer printouts. Once the BRA's Wells realized that the surface water stored by the San Gabriel dams would be too expensive to sell, he asked the Army engineers to reduce Laneport reservoir's available "yield," roughly analogous to marketable water. Logically, one might assume that the bigger the reservoir, the cheaper its water would be. The truth is, when a reservoir exceeds its optimum size (and this changes when other dams enter the picture), its water becomes *more* expensive. North Fork combined with Laneport had produced this result.⁴⁵⁹ Laneport's size had to be reduced or its water could not be sold. But cutting its size (and hence, its

⁴⁵⁹South Fork Dam had compounded the problem; that dam project was killed partly because its cost-effectiveness could not be justified, and partly because it would increase the price of water from the other San Gabriel reservoirs.

water cost) decreased its effectiveness as a flood control dam. Thus, the water-selling agency (the BRA) and the flood-control agency (the Corps) found themselves at odds over their central missions. In an effort to work out the problem, over a six-month period, BRA and Corps engineers quietly exchanged combinations of numbers in the form of “yield studies.”

When they finally agreed on a number, Laneport got smaller. Its water could be sold more cheaply, and its flood control capacity was reduced. Both agencies seemed satisfied. No one else seems to have been aware of this delicate negotiation.⁴⁶⁰ The dam projects went forward. Had the two water bureaucracies not worked out their differences, the Brazos River Authority might have suffered acute financial distress, which might have rippled through the entire Brazos Valley. But they did work things out, and the two big bureaucracies soldiered on.

⁴⁶⁰Bryan, *ibid.*, BRA directors meeting, April 18, 1966, 3831-3831 with Exhibit E, 3842-3843; Memo, Wells, Sept. 20, 1967, Box 257, BRA; Letter, Wells to Fickessen, Sept. 29, 1967, 2; Letters, Carson Hoge to W.H. Sims, Forrest & Cotton, Inc., Nov. 6, 1967; Hoge to District Engineer, Nov. 6, 1967; Hoge to Sims, Nov. 8, 1967; Memo from Hoge, Dec. 28, 1967; Letter, Sims to Wells with memo on Laneport Reservoir and North Fork Reservoir Yield Studies, March 20, 1968; Memo, Bob Steele to Sims, April 5, 1968; Letter, Forrest & Cotton, Inc. to Hoge, April 10, 1968. Finally, in May 1968, the Brazos River Authority released a “Report on the San Gabriel Watershed,” the result of months of Corps’ tinkering with yields figures, which satisfied the BRA’s need for salable water.

In 1948, when Georgetown started campaigning for dams on the San Gabriel's upper forks, its four thousand citizens assumed that when the dams were built, the stored water would be theirs. If Taylor wanted to buy water, the thinking went, that city of eight thousand could tap the river at Circleville and pipe it south. No one else seemed vaguely interested. About a thousand people lived in Round Rock; Granger and Bartlett combined had about three thousand. All of Williamson County's little towns had bored wells into the Edwards Aquifer, on the west side, or the Upper Taylor Marl Formation to the east. There was plenty for everyone except in drought years, when farmers and ranchers suffered.

When the Corps picked Laneport as the dam site, Taylor's ruling elite assumed that its water would be theirs. All through the Fifties, when drought reigned supreme, lakes and water became magical elixirs in people's minds. It became an article of Texas political faith that every trickle of water should be caught before it flowed "wastefully" into the Gulf, whatever the cost. Wilson Fox fervently believed that a lake at Laneport would guarantee Taylor's future, in much the same way that the Black Waxy had put money in the bank.⁴⁶¹ No one in Williamson County seems to have imagined that the water might cost money. And few seemed aware that the BRA, the "local" public agency that

⁴⁶¹Interview: Tom Bullion, May 12, 2000, Taylor

would control any water dammed on the San Gabriel, was legally obligated to provide downstream rice farmers and Dow Chemical with a contractually regulated amount of Brazos watershed flow, limiting how much of any river could be held back for municipal use. In years of ample rain, this presented no problem, but during droughts, the superior water rights of downstream interests would stymie the BRA from committing upstream reservoir for “local” use when it was most needed.

It is not clear that anyone in Williamson County had thought this through in 1967, when the dams were about to be built. Several realities were at war. The BRA needed “transparent” dams that would allow the waters of the Brazos to reach its primary downstream markets. At the same time, the BRA had discovered that small upstream dams, which utilized hardly any water for local needs, could be quite advantageous. Too, the BRA desperately needed income. Cajoling the Army engineers and their congressional backers to build dams near potential water markets became a major BRA strategy to buttress its bottom line. But sometimes, as in Williamson County, these needs conflicted.

After its 1956 experience with Belton Dam, when the unsold Belton reservoir kept Dow Chemical operating, the BRA had warmed to North Fork Dam. In 1967, North Fork seemed to be a potential Belton Reservoir clone. In the words of an old-timer BRA executive, it would provide “another bucket that’s full . . . or

fuller.”⁴⁶² Williamson County looked hopelessly stagnant. Despite the arrival of Interstate 35, the county’s population had barely grown, from 35,044 in 1960 to 37,305 in 1970. Georgetown gained nearly a thousand new citizens. Taylor, still considered the county’s leading city, garnered just 116 new residents during the decade. Round Rock picked up 353 residents, pushing its 1970 population total to 2,811 citizens, for the county’s highest growth rate, 12.5 percent. East Williamson County was a disaster zone, especially around Granger, where Laneport Dam was emptying the once thickly populated Black Waxy. Granger lost ten percent of its population.⁴⁶³

By 1970, despite the new interregional highway and visions of lake resorts dancing in a few entrepreneurial heads, most of Williamson County’s residents lived quiet, small-town lives, still dependent on money from farming, ranching, government and extractive industries (limestone strip mining). Agriculture was the number one industry. Two-thirds of Williamson County’s 722,560 acres were still in cultivation. It was pleasant living on a small scale. A few high school graduates went to Texas A&M to study agriculture or veterinary science and returned to build their parents’ agricultural businesses, but most migrated to the big cities, along with most other children of Texas’ vast rural

⁴⁶²Bukala, *ibid.*

⁴⁶³Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 345-346

hinterland after World War II, to make their way onto more exhilarating urban stages.

Williamson County was sleepwalking into a new age. There was some talk about growth and industrial recruiting and quick drive times to Austin, but for the most part, even the most sophisticated local businessmen and politicians saw only faint glimmers of what was to come. “What limited vision we had then,” exclaimed former Georgetown mayor and long-time banker Jay Sloan from a distance of thirty years. “We never in our wildest imagination would have imagined this” — a millennial population of two hundred and fifty thousand and bumper-to-bumper traffic crawling along Interstate 35 between Austin and Dallas.⁴⁶⁴

That included the Brazos River Authority’s top planners in 1970. The exceptions could be counted on one hand, and they were “local”: Georgetown’s Owen Sherrill, who had long preached that the new interstate and lakes on the upper San Gabriel would produce a population explosion; Taylor’s Wilson Fox, deeply fearing that his city might founder with the double loss of its old agricultural economy and the new interstate highway that would

⁴⁶⁴U.S. Census 2000

suck business away, pinned his hopes on Laneport Dam; Round Rock banker-developer Tom Nelson, who helped put Round Rock on the map by recruiting Westinghouse; land investor Tom Kouri of Austin, who in 1964 purchased the first of two perfectly placed Williamson County ranches which eventually overlapped two important interstate highway intersections; a Burnet investment group that developed a commercial cave hard by Interstate 35; and a young flying instructor named Bobby Stanton, who thought people might like to live “in the country” and work in Austin.

At the time, these men were considered a bit loony. The general view was that growth would occur, but nothing spectacular. Many Williamson County business types thought the interstate would “kill” Georgetown and Round Rock. When the lakes filled, everyone was certain, there would be plenty of cheap water for everyone. A former Round Rock city manager recalls, “Round Rock and Georgetown thought when the government built the reservoir, they could just stick straws in the water and suck it out.”⁴⁶⁵ In 1968, Georgetown asked the BRA how much municipal water supply the new reservoir could be expected to yield.⁴⁶⁶ The BRA replied that the agency’s “priority” was to satisfy water needs

⁴⁶⁵ Interview: Jim Hislop, Oct. 21, 2001, Austin

⁴⁶⁶ Letter, L.R. Hudson to Wells, Dec. 23, 1968, Box 257, BRA. Hudson was a consulting engineer for W.H. Mullins, Inc., which had been hired by Georgetown, under the direction of Mayor Jay C. Sloan, to do a projection of “growth, water demands and possible treatment facilities” for the city.

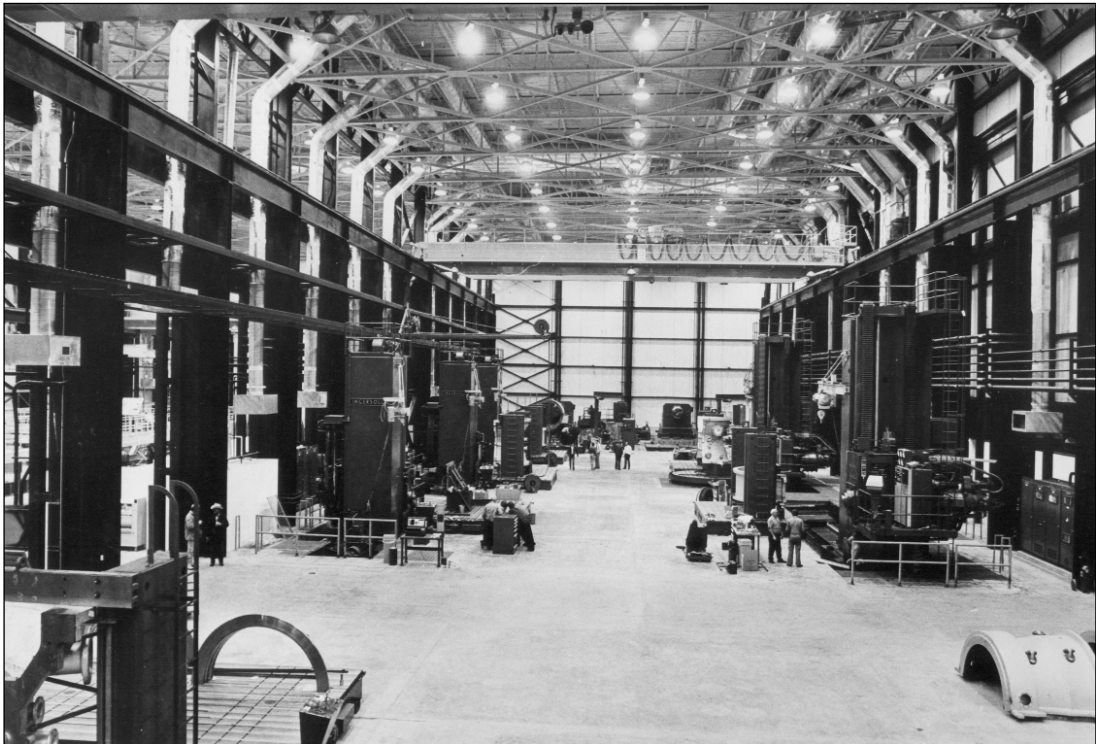


Figure 31: Westinghouse's giant turbine manufacturing facility.

in the “immediate vicinity of the reservoirs,” which was not really the case. Water from either North Fork or Laneport, the BRA’s chief planner said, would easily “meet the needs of Georgetown.”⁴⁶⁷ Six years passed before anyone in Williamson County again raised the question of water supply with the BRA.

In that interval, an extraordinary thing happened. Westinghouse Corporation moved to Round Rock. In 1971-72, the company built a giant turbine plant halfway between Round Rock and Georgetown. The plant lay in Round Rock’s extraterritorial jurisdiction and initially employed 750 workers, but that number was expected to double in ten years. Westinghouse had purchased thirty-three hundred acres of ranch land that a company subsidiary planned to develop as a “new town.”⁴⁶⁸ Westinghouse embraced Williamson County, purchasing a pair of Texas Longhorns to graze in front of the plant’s I-35 entrance. Round Rock cut the company a sweet deal: no annexation for seven years (hence no taxes), new water and sewer works provided, free of cost, six miles north of town. Westinghouse just had to buy the water.⁴⁶⁹ The deal was dicey for Round Rock. It depended

⁴⁶⁷Letter, Carson H. Hoge to Hudson, Jan. 3, 1969

⁴⁶⁸Hislop, *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹Interviews: N.G. “Bunky” Whitlow, July 1, 1998, Round Rock. In 1970, Whitlow was vice president of Farmers State Bank (owned by Tom Nelson) and a rising star in Round Rock; Tom Nelson, Oct. 23, 2001, Austin; Hislop, *ibid.*, Letter, Mayor Dale Hester to George Chapman, president of Westinghouse, April 23, 1971, City of Round Rock. Westinghouse bought ranches from Leon E. Behrens, Raymond Pearson and the Lomac Corporation. It also optioned James Garland Walsh’s 1,400 acres for a million dollars, but backed out after the gas turbine market collapsed. Later Tom Nelson purchased it for \$850 an

on successful industrial, commercial and/or multi-family development between Westinghouse and the city's core, none of which existed. "The way things worked in those days, we tried to get a deal going, and then we tried to play catch-up to make it work," Hislop said.⁴⁷⁰

Austin and Williamson County leaders took note. Westinghouse's decision to move to Round Rock jolted the county's "hick" reputation. Though Westinghouse's turbine market collapsed when the 1974 oil crisis shocked the United States, Round Rock kept seeking Blue Chip industries. In 1976 it lassoed McNeil Consumer Products, a Johnson and Johnson subsidiary, which started making Tylenol tablets on a new campus north of town. Industrial recruiters eyed Round Rock with new respect.

Across the county there was envy. Clearly the county's old dependence on well water drawn from aquifers would not satisfy the population explosion that was gathering steam along Interstate 35. In the summer of 1974, Georgetown's leadership decided it needed to secure rights to North Fork Dam's water. After informal conversations with Brazos River Authority officials, Mayor Joe E. Crawford announced that when the dam was completed, Georgetown would build a treatment plant and

acre — "a good investment," he says — which became Brushy Creek North and Stony Creek. Tobin Surveys Inc., "Williamson County, Texas," 1969, San Antonio

⁴⁷⁰Hislop, *ibid.*

sell water from North Fork dam to neighboring towns. The purchase price would be ten cents per thousand gallons, he said, “plus ten percent or some reasonable return on our investment.”⁴⁷¹ Round Rock, Florence, Westinghouse and the Jonah Water Supply Corporation expressed interest. That fall, Georgetown officially requested thirteen million gallons per day from the Brazos River Authority.⁴⁷²

Wells reminded the mayor that the reservoir’s maximum dependable yield would be only twelve thousand acre feet a year, or twelve million gallons per day. When might Georgetown actually start using water from North Fork? Wells queried Crawford.⁴⁷³ The mayor replied that “our minimum needs will be eight million gallons per day for the first two years and eleven million thereafter for the next ten years.”⁴⁷⁴ This was a figure that seemed to have no basis in reality, even assuming that Round Rock and Westinghouse used copious amounts of North Fork water.

Wells clarified the situation for Georgetown. The water’s cost, he wrote the mayor, would be on the order of forty to fifty dollars per acre foot or about \$125 to \$155 per million gallons — 12.5 to 15.5 cents for one thousand gallons, rather than ten cents per thousand.

⁴⁷¹“Georgetown offers water to neighboring cities,” *Williamson County Sun*, July 25, 1974

⁴⁷²Letter, Crawford to Wells, Oct. 1, 1974, Box 257, BRA

⁴⁷³Letter, Wells to Crawford, Oct. 4, 1974, *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴Letter, Crawford to Wells, Oct. 22, 1974, *ibid.*

At this rate, the cost for 11 mgd of raw water would be \$500,000 to \$620,000 per year. The cost for 8 mgd would be \$365,000 to \$450,000 per year. These represent very sizeable commitments, and before preparing a contract for consideration by the City of Georgetown calling for annual payments of these magnitudes, I thought I should call these anticipated costs to your attention . . . ⁴⁷⁵

Crawford was stunned. “We were quite started by your letter of October 29, 1974, in which you quoted prices of raw water to the City of Georgetown,” he wrote back. Previous conversations, he reminded Wells, had alluded to a figure of ten cents per thousand, which would result in having to charge thirty cents per thousand “in the mains . . . not including the amortization of the plant and appurtenances.” That would represent an increase of seven to ten cents over the present cost of water in town. “In your letter,” the mayor continued, “it would appear that Georgetown would be obligated to pay for the total amount of water contracted even though it was not used. This simply is a financial burden that cannot be assumed.” In good faith, Crawford wrote, the city had gone public with its plan, pressed forward with land acquisition near the dam, and had hired consultants to pursue the matter. Now the city had “much misgivings about our course of action.”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁵Letter, Wells to Crawford, Oct. 29, 1974, *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶Letter, Crawford to Wells, Nov. 4, 1974, *ibid.*

In reply, Wells softened his tone but maintained his message.⁴⁷⁷ A few weeks later, a chastened Mayor Crawford revised Georgetown's request to the BRA for North Fork water down to one million gallons per day starting in 1979 or 1980, when the reservoir was expected to open for business, for five years. Then Georgetown would probably need another one million gallons per day. "Beyond this time it become anybody's guess," Crawford wrote glumly.⁴⁷⁸ Shortly thereafter, the mayor died of a heart attack.

Part of what happened was that Round Rock city officials had complained to the BRA about Georgetown's proposal to control all of North Fork's water. "We said, 'We've got as much right to that water as Georgetown does, and we *need* it,' " former City Manager Hislop remembers.

Then the BRA came back and said, "You know what? We're going to write a take-and-pay contract." What that meant was that rather than sticking your straws in and paying the BRA meter for just what you took out, like everybody had thought it would be, with a take-and-pay contract, if you signed for twelve million gallons, the day you stick your straw in you start paying for twelve million gallons right then.⁴⁷⁹

Apparently, the Brazos River Authority did reverse gears sharply during the summer of 1974. In July, the Williamson

⁴⁷⁷Letter, Wells to Crawford, Nov. 6, 1974, *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁸Letter, Crawford to Wells, Nov. 27, 1974, *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁹Hislop, *ibid.*

County *Sun* had quoted Wells as saying that ten cents per thousand gallons was “an outside figure . . . We hope the actual price will be less than that.”⁴⁸⁰ Three months later, Wells was telling Georgetown that the price would be between 12.5 and 15.5 cents per thousand, and that a new take-and-pay contract would be required. After several years of jockeying, Georgetown and Round Rock split the North Fork Reservoir’s water. In the spring of 1978, each city agreed to buy 6,700 acre feet at thirteen cents per thousand gallons.⁴⁸¹ Each city built its own water treatment plant, using federal grant money to cover most of the expense. By the time the deal was concluded, each city considered itself lucky to have locked up that much water.

There was a final fallout — enmity between Georgetown and Round Rock that continues to this day. A former Georgetown mayor admits, “We didn’t realize the need to reserve that water out there. Our growth had been two percent a year and the BRA was telling us we would have to pay a standby price. ‘Who’s going to use it?’ we asked. Then, when we found out that Round Rock was reserving it, it was, ‘How come we let Round Rock have all that water?’ ”⁴⁸² For its part, Round Rock delighted in one-upping Georgetown. “I’ll never forget,” banker Whitlow recalls with an impish grin, “ole’ Thatcher Atkin standing up in a meeting and

⁴⁸⁰*Sun*, July 25, 1974, *ibid*.

⁴⁸¹“Dow Chemical Company’s First Request for Production of Documents,” Request RR-20, Fiscal Year 1989, Brazos River Authority, Box 362, Georgetown-RR-24, BRA

⁴⁸²Sloan, *ibid*.

shouting 'til he was red in the face, 'The people of Round Rock came over here under the cover of night and stole our water!' He actually *said* that!"⁴⁸³

⁴⁸³Whitlow, Sept. 14, 2000, Round Rock

Goodbye, Booty's Crossings

I am inner-tubing the rapids of the San Gabriel in western Williamson County. There is nothing to do but melt into the scenery as I tumble over small waterfalls, dawdle in still emerald pools. Below me lurk three primeval-looking gar, each a foot long. Wading sandpipers cool their stilt legs in the water near the shore. Above me looms a fifty-foot limestone cliff, pocked with clumps of yellow wildflowers and caves. Behind the sheer bluffs, hidden in thick stands of cedar, several pairs of rare golden-cheeked warblers tend their young. It is May in Central Texas.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸⁴ Linda Scarbrough, unpublished manuscript, June 1974, New York, N.Y., 33

I wrote this in 1974 after making a pilgrimage from my home in New York City to the San Gabriel River. Work had commenced on both dams. If one avoided the dam sites themselves, where gigantic, ear-splitting earth-moving machines were rearranging the shape of the earth, one could imagine that nothing had changed in the San Gabriel Valley since a vigorous Paleo-Indian people first settled there about 9,500 B.C. — an early florescence of prehistoric North American man.⁴⁸⁵ I floated the river with Linda Crawford Graves, a minister's wife with a sunny personality and a bent for archeology, the outdoors, and politics. Graves so loved the San Gabriel's North Fork that when it became clear that the river valley would be buried under a lake, she commissioned a movie about the North Fork's low-water crossings, famous in Central Texas for their serene beauty.⁴⁸⁶

Dropping rapidly (for Texas) through steep limestone canyons at an average rate of seventeen feet per mile, the North

⁴⁸⁵*Final Environmental Impact Statement: Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes, San Gabriel River, Texas*, Feb. 24, 1972, U.S. Army Engineer District, Fort Worth, II-22-23. Ten miles to the northwest, near the Williamson County town of Florence, a team of archeologists from the University of Texas at Austin in 2000-2001 turned up a stunningly rich early Clovis site which threatened to rewrite archeological textbooks on the human species in North America. Whether there might have been such evidence buried deep in the layers of the Balcones Escarpment along the San Gabriel Valley is unknown at this time.

⁴⁸⁶Diane Koenig, *The San Gabriel River Crossings*, circa 1976. Sadly, I was not able to schedule a "re-run" of my 1974 float trip with Graves. Shortly after I spoke with her about this project, she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. She died November 5, 2001.

Fork was indeed lovely.⁴⁸⁷ Even the Corps acknowledged that it qualified as a United States “scenic river area,” but only the Texas Legislature could give it that designation. It had declined to do so in 1969. The Texas Senate did include the entire San Gabriel River in a proposed Texas Natural Streams System, but the House killed the bill.⁴⁸⁸ The potential protected status of the North Fork had a weird, Catch-22 quality: it handily met requirements for protection as a U.S. “wild river,” except that human access to the river was not restrictive enough. On the other hand, it would have qualified as a U.S. “recreational river area” — except that it was too difficult to reach!⁴⁸⁹

White-water canoeists were captivated by the North Fork’s winding, heady chutes through “steeply eroded hills, tall rocky bluffs, spurs, knobs and escarpments”” rising one hundred feet to two hundred and fifty feet over the river bed, in the Corps’ words.⁴⁹⁰ Bob Burleson practiced law in Temple, canoed avidly, and sat on the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. In 1974, his views of the San Gabriel’s North Fork were rhapsodic; his attitude bitter toward the plan to dam it.

The San Gabriel is as pretty a stream as you have in Texas. By any measure you have — scenic bluffs, beautiful clear water — it is the best canoeing around. The upper reaches are just super; as you go down, you see beaver, deer, moss-

⁴⁸⁷*Final Environmental Impact Statement*, II-10

⁴⁸⁸*Ibid.*, II-29

⁴⁸⁹*Ibid.*, II-28

⁴⁹⁰*Ibid.*, II-20

covered springs, little graveyards, old Indian camps. The canoeing is seasonal, there's no question about that. It's Spring and Fall, and any time there's a good thundershower. I've got a fellow in Liberty Hill who calls me any time there's a really good rain storm. If the phone rang right now, I'd say adios. I can name fifty people who canoe that stream regularly, but the numbers certainly go into the thousands.⁴⁹¹

The North Fork's recreational use was indeed remarkable, considering that the place never was publicized.⁴⁹² A caliche-topped road followed the river's bends through corridors of pecan, live oak, cottonwood and cedar elm that met overhead. Booty's Road crossed the river four times, creating, in essence, four free "public" water parks.⁴⁹³ Each crossing was named for an early settler, but because Booty's Crossing lay closest to Georgetown, all the crossings became collectively known as "the Booty's." All shared common characteristics — imposing limestone cliffs draped with mosses and wildflowers, stairstepped shelves of hard limestone or river-smoothed pebbled beaches, sapphire swimming holes. Sandwiched between the crossings was the river itself, which, as the Corps reported,

consisted of long stretches of barren bedrock riffles, short stretches of gravel riffles, with intermittent pools

⁴⁹¹Linda Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 20

⁴⁹²No one ever studied how many people actually recreated in the San Gabriel's North Fork Valley, since it was not part of any public park system. Though the land in the valley was held entirely in private hands, the four low-water crossings gave the public legal access to the river, and the public used it extensively.

⁴⁹³EIS, II-20, Appendix A

These streams, being primarily spring fed, are typically clear and rapid . . . ⁴⁹⁴

Booty's, Jenkins, Box and Hunt Crossings presented a smorgasbord of topographical features, which allowed Sunday picnickers, weekend smoochers, Boy Scout troops, fishermen, swimmers, arrowhead hunters, rock hounds, spelunkers, inner tubers and birdwatchers to simultaneously enjoy the ten-mile stretch of the San Gabriel North Fork without troubling each other or the river.⁴⁹⁵

It was clear why the Tonkawas called this country *takatchue pouetsu*, land of good water.⁴⁹⁶ During their century of dominance, ranchers had marked the land lightly. Hundreds of springs still bubbled and seeped out of the ground. Tall grasses — bluestem, buffalo, grama and others less common — still thrived. Season after season, all manner of wild creatures wintered, nested, fattened and reproduced in the San Gabriel Valley. Five rare and endangered species frequently visited: Southern bald eagle, American peregrine falcon, whooping crane, greater sandhill crane, green kingfisher. The endangered golden-cheeked warbler nested there. American osprey and black-capped vireo, while not listed in the Endangered Species Act, were rare enough,

⁴⁹⁴Ibid., II-21

⁴⁹⁵“There is just one Booty's Crossing,” *Williamson County Sun*, Spring 1974

⁴⁹⁶Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 25

and they were often sighted along the North Fork. Roadrunner, wild turkey, and anhinga made the valley their home, along with 272 other avian species. It was a magnificent habitat for birds.⁴⁹⁷ Nutria, long-tailed weasel, mink, beaver, white-tailed deer, cougar, bobcat, ringtailed cat, grey fox, raccoon, striped skunk and six bat species were common.⁴⁹⁸ The timid golden-cheeked warbler, soft and small as a mouse, nested in Williamson County's canyon country, its dwindling habitat composed of virgin stands of mature Ashe Juniper found in a handful of Edwards Plateau counties.⁴⁹⁹ But with a dam rising on the North Fork, and subdivisions multiplying nearby, the river and the animals were living on borrowed time.

The North Fork of the San Gabriel was a treasure trove of Hill Country ecological habitat, especially in light of its close proximity to Austin and the new interstate highway that was funneling thousands more people into the county with every year. Few Georgetown voices protested the dam; the few exceptions were an odd mixture of ranch women, archeologists and historians concerned about the loss of unexamined archeological

⁴⁹⁷EIS, Appendix E

⁴⁹⁸Ibid., Appendix D

⁴⁹⁹Interview: Eleanor Brogren, May 1974, Georgetown; *EIS*, II-21-22; Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 33



Figure 32: Crockett Gardens, circa 1978.



Figure 33: Knight-Jenkins Crossing, one of four crossings buried under Lake Georgetown.

sites.⁵⁰⁰ Most of Georgetown, after all, had fought for decades to secure North Fork Dam.

After Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 which went into effect January 1, 1970, the Corps started working up an environmental impact statement on the San Gabriel dams, as required by the new national law.⁵⁰¹ On April 21, 1971, the Corps of Engineers filed a “final draft” of its *Final Environmental Statement* on Laneport, North Fork and South Fork lakes and asked for comments from government agencies affected by the projects.⁵⁰² It was not the thorough and “detailed” examination Congress appears to have envisioned for the government’s public works projects. The draft *Final Environmental Statement* was eleven pages long. One sketchy map of Williamson County and letters from three government agencies

⁵⁰⁰“Hunting at North Fork draws landowner gripes,” *Sun*, Feb. 14, 1974; Interview, Linda Graves, May 1974, Georgetown. The local critics included Graves, “Bob” Gunn, Vera Allen, Agnes Wade, Judy Shepherd, Dr. Jud Custer, and Dr. Ed H. Steelman. Their opposition focused on limited targets, such as the Corps’ poor control of hunters on what had become “public” lands, or on the limited period of time allocated to archeological and historical studies of the San Gabriel Valley before it became the bottom of a lake.

⁵⁰¹*C.C. Allison v. Stanley R. Resor*, Civil Action No. A-71-CA-84, Aug. 13, 1971, included as VIII-107 of the Corps’ *Final Environmental Statement Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes San Gabriel River, Texas*, Feb. 24, 1972, U.S. Army Engineer District, Fort Worth, Texas

⁵⁰²Draft: *Final Environmental Statement Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes San Gabriel River, Texas*, April 21, 1971. Though South Fork dam had been indefinitely deferred, the three dams had been authorized as a unit and so was treated as a unit in the Corps’ document.

were attached. “Cursory” would have been a kind description of the effort.

Four months later, on August 13, 1971, an Austin veterinarian and Civil War buff, Dr. Charles Curtis Allison, who owned 366 acres of San Gabriel riverfront property, 326 of which the Army had condemned for Laneport dam, filed a complaint for injunctive and declaratory relief with the U.S. District Court in Austin.⁵⁰³ Perhaps Allison imagined himself emulating one of the Confederate generals he admired for dash and daring; he was standing against the Federal Army on behalf of Williamson County farmers.⁵⁰⁴ Allison’s land, sandwiched between Wilson Fox’s and Virginia Forword Lawrence’s “ranches,” reminded travelers of Virginia’s rolling hunt country. Allison’s attorney was a young environmental activist named Richard A. Shannon, who sat on the

⁵⁰³*C.C. Allison v. Stanley R. Resor*, Civil Action A 71 CA 84, U.S. District Court, Western District of Texas, Austin Division, Aug. 13, 1971; included on VIII-107-129 of the *Final Environmental Impact Statement: Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes San Gabriel River, Texas*, Feb. 24, 1972, *ibid*.

⁵⁰⁴Interview: Richard A. Shannon, November 3, 2001, Austin. Allison was introduced to Shannon by Bob Clark, a young biologist from Taylor who worked for Senator A.R. “Babe” Schwartz on water pollution legislation. The lawsuit was later amended to read *Allison v. Froehlke*, the correct name for the Secretary of the Army, on May 7, 1972. The amended lawsuit asked for a preliminary injunction to stop all activity on the San Gabriel River projects.

newly formed board of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club. Allison's complaint was joined by Austin's Sierra Club chapter, the Travis County chapter of the Audubon Society, Save Our Springs, the Texas Explorers' Club, and Bob Burleson, president of the Explorer's Club and a Texas Parks and Wildlife commissioner. The complaint attacked the Army Corps of Engineers on a number of grounds, chief among them that the Army engineers had so drastically altered the San Gabriel River project since Congress authorized the three dams in 1962 that building Laneport and North Fork would constitute an illegal act.⁵⁰⁵

The Allison lawsuit also argued that the Corps' *Final Environmental Statement* on the San Gabriel Valley failed to meet Congress's mandate for an in-depth examination of the environmental impacts of proposed dams, as well as evaluating alternatives to building the dams, such as the Soil Conservation Service's small dams program that Williamson County had backed so overwhelmingly at the polls. The lawsuit argued other points as well:

⁵⁰⁵In the nine years since the dams had been authorized, the lawsuit charged, their estimated cost had risen from \$45 million to \$72.3 million; their order of construction had changed from a staged plan to one of "simultaneous" construction of Laneport and North Fork; their storage capacity and effective yields had been reduced about 25 percent; their locations and designs had been altered; and their cost-benefits ratios had dropped from 2.8 to 1 to 1.7 to 1. See Judge Jack Roberts' "Findings of Fact," June 29, 1972, CA A-71-CA-84, U.S. District Court, Western District of Texas, Austin. Also see Final Environmental Statement, VIII-111-112

- Construction of Laneport, North Fork and South Fork dams would tend to “encourage the erection of structures in the flood prone area . . . because downstream property owners would be lulled into a sense of security by the presence of large dams upstream.” Since the dams were designed to protect against a fifty-year flood — not the one hundred year flood that the 1921 flood surely had been — the Corps could not “assure . . . safe surroundings.”⁵⁰⁶

- The value of the Upper San Gabriel River as a “free-flowing stream,” as defined by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, had not been given “adequate consideration” by the Corps of Engineers.⁵⁰⁷

- If all three dams were constructed, “one-fourth to one-third” of the San Gabriel River — “one of the most archeologically unstudied river drainage systems” in Texas — would be inundated. The acting director of the Texas Archeological Salvage Project assessed the potential damage:

The three reservoir area, considered as a unit, offers a highly unusual situation in that they bracket two distinctly different physiographic and biotic areas within a short river drainage segment. This fact alone is significant in evaluating their potential for ecologically oriented research. Without further and substantial investigation . . . another

⁵⁰⁶Ibid., VIII-116

⁵⁰⁷Ibid., VIII-117

“laboratory” will be removed from the continually diminishing sampling universe available for study.⁵⁰⁸

- Though the Corps of Engineers had the authority to build multi-purpose dams, federal funding for such projects was limited to three specific goals: flood control, wildlife enhancement and recreation. A Corps-built dam was allowed to store, or “conserve,” water for municipal or industrial use, but that portion of the cost of the dam had to be borne by a local government such as the Brazos River Authority. There was a cap on the water storage portion of any Corps project — thirty percent. Originally, the cost of water storage in the San Gabriel project would have greatly exceeded that limit: 40.6 percent for Laneport and 44 percent for the three-reservoir package had been allocated for water conservation.⁵⁰⁹

- The Army’s plans for Laneport and North Fork dams would damage native wildlife, contradicting the Environmental Quality Protection Act of 1970. Both dams would increase the population of “rough fish” in the watershed, virtually eliminating a “good quality” natural fishery. North Fork Dam also would

⁵⁰⁸Letter, David S. Dibble to Douglas Scovill, Jan 8, 1971, “Comment on the USCE Environmental Statement: Laneport, North Fork, and South Fork Lakes, San Gabriel River, Texas,” *ibid*, VIII-21. Dibble ran the Texas Archeological Salvage Project at the University of Texas Balcones Research Center, Austin.

⁵⁰⁹*Ibid.*, VIII-112. Those high figures were ultimately reduced to roughly 25 percent of the cost of the overall project.

eliminate substantial habitat of the rare and endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler and of the wild turkey.⁵¹⁰

- Cameron Reservoir, a proposed dam in Milam County, would, if built, “permanently inundate about 45,750 acres of the lands of the Little River Basin, which includes most of the 33,600 acres which defendents purport to protect from flood by the proposed construction of Laneport Dam.”⁵¹¹ In other words, the chief rationale for Laneport dam — protection of Milam County’s flood plain — would disappear under another man-made lake if Cameron Dam were ever built.

Wilson Fox was irked. During the previous year, he had guided the Brazos River Authority’s response to the Army’s requests for comments for its environmental impact study of the San Gabriel Valley. At Walter Wells’ request, he had edited the BRA’s official text and become the essential, pivotal figure keeping Wells and Congressman Pickle on track with regard to Laneport’s progress.⁵¹² Now this — and from a land owner who

⁵¹⁰Ibid., II-21, VIII-125

⁵¹¹Ibid., VIII-125, VIII-126

⁵¹²Letters: Wells to Wilson Fox, Oct. 7, 1970; Fox to Wells, Aug. 12, 1971; Wells to Fox, Aug. 23, 1971; Pickle to Wells, Aug. 23, 1971; D.L. Orendorff to Wells, Sept. 16, 1971; Wells to Orendorff, Sept. 27, 1971, San Gabriel File, “Environmental Assurances,” BRA, Waco. By now, Wells, Pickle and Wilson Fox were quite chummy; Wells

lived in Austin and had not been particularly active in anti-Laneport activity until now. Fox sent a copy of the petition to Pickle, noting,

. . . whoever worked this out really put forth a great deal of study. I am not personally acquainted with Richard A. Shannon and have asked a number of lawyers about him, but have not received any satisfactory information. No doubt someone is paying his bill, and possibly some of these outdoor-indoor organizations may be contributing something to the cause.⁵¹³

By the time the case came to Judge Jack Roberts' courtroom nine months later, the Army had produced a brand new, nearly two-inch-thick *Final Environmental Statement* for Laneport, North Fork and South Fork Lakes. At 235 pages, plus maps, tables, plates and an extensive bibliography, it was a bloated green document that could not possibly be labeled "cursory."⁵¹⁴ President Nixon had asked \$7.5 million for the San Gabriel Project; then had frozen funds after Allison filed his lawsuit.⁵¹⁵ Political change had blown through Williamson County, as the redistricting process switched Congressman Pickle with Congressman Poage — an ironic development, since Poage had so

always addressed his letters to Fox to "Pillbox 192," an allusion whose meaning has been lost over time; Pickle called Fox "My Beer Friend."

⁵¹³Letter, Wilson Fox to Pickle, Aug. 30, 1971, *ibid.*

⁵¹⁴The final "Final Environmental Statement" was dated Feb. 24, 1972.

⁵¹⁵Memo, Pickle to Wells, Fox, etc., Jan. 25, 1972, San Gabriel "General" File, BRA; Connie Sherley, "San Gabriel Dam Suit Filed," *Austin American*, Aug. 19, 1971, A-17

often displayed displeasure at the county's intransigence against Laneport.⁵¹⁶ The National Audubon Society had weighed in with an opinion that Laneport Dam would be acceptable from an environmental point of view, but not North or South Fork dams.⁵¹⁷ The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department had withdrawn its previous approval of the San Gabriel project, harshly criticizing the Corps of Engineers' approach to environmental impact statements:

When this department reviewed the draft environmental statement . . . it was our impression that because of adverse impacts which the statement reflected the project would be abandoned and further alternative means sought. This has not been the case. We, therefore, are forced into withdrawing our concurrence of January 7, 1971 If the only purpose of an environmental impact statement is to fulfill the physical requirements of NEPA and not to allow us to seriously consider the consequences of our actions upon the environment, then there seems to be little need for the continuation of the review process . . .⁵¹⁸

The guardians of Texas' parks and wildlife resources surprised nearly everyone. After the P&W letter was circulated through the state's water development circles, the Governor's

⁵¹⁶Ibid.; Letters: Shannon to Poage, Jan. 28, 1972, Box 692, file 7, Poage Papers; Poage to Gene. N. Fondren, June 21, 1971, *ibid.*

⁵¹⁷Memo, John L. Spinks Jr. to Pickle, May 1, 1972, with attached letter from Spinks to the Corps regarding the Audubon Society's comments on the EIS on the San Gabriel River dams. Pickle sent the packet to Wells on May 23, 1972. BRA

⁵¹⁸Letter, James U. Cross to Colonel Floyd Henk, May 19, 1972, BRA. Cross was executive director of the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife; Henk headed up the Fort Worth District of the Corps of Engineers.

chief planner brushed off the Parks and Wildlife's protest. "The State's position remains unchanged," he wrote the Corps. "The actions of a single agency cannot alter the official position adopted."⁵¹⁹ For its part, the Corps carried on as if nothing untoward was happening. It pressed forward to advertise and award bids to start construction on North Fork and Laneport dams.⁵²⁰

On June 2, 1972, Judge Roberts eyed a packed courtroom while Allison's two attorneys, Shannon and Lloyd Doggett of Austin, laid out the plaintiffs' case for temporarily halting the Corps' activities on the San Gabriel River.⁵²¹ The Army's top engineers looked on, along with Walter Wells and David Kultgen, manager and counsel for the Brazos River Authority.⁵²² Wilson Fox and a Pickle aide attended the proceedings, as did a slew of Austin environmentalists and a Georgetown Boy Scout troop.⁵²³

⁵¹⁹Letters, Col. Henk to Ed Grisham, May 30, 1972; Grisham to Henk, June 1, 1972. Grisham was director, Division of Planning Coordination, Office of the Governor, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers; BRA

⁵²⁰Letter, Henk to Pickle, May 23, 1972, BRA

⁵²¹Decades later, Doggett became a justice on the Texas Supreme Court; still later he succeeded Congressman Pickle as congressman for the Tenth District.

⁵²²Memo for the record: Wells, June 3, 1972, *ibid.*

⁵²³Letters, Wells to Pickle, June 5, 1972, *ibid.*; Wilson Fox to Pearce Johnson, Parks and Wildlife Department, June 5, 1972, *ibid.*; "Opponents Appealing Dam Decision," June 8, 1972, Austin

Shannon and Doggett developed the original complaint's charges by calling two rather dramatic witnesses. Dennis Neal Russell, chief of the environmental branch of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, painted a dire picture of the proposed lakes' consequences. Their recreational benefits had been "over-inflated" by the Corps, he said, as there were several other large recreational lakes within a half hour's drive from either lake. In other words, there was too much competition for the new lakes to attract much of a recreational following, despite the Corps' claims to the contrary. In addition, Russell testified, since the reservoirs were primarily flood control structures, their levels would fluctuate "a great deal." North Fork Lake would fluctuate "inside of the canyon walls, from 20 to 40 feet" over a ten-year period, leaving ugly stains. Laneport Reservoir, sprawling shallowly over relatively flat land, would "move laterally in a flood waters are released, leaving large exposed mud banks." The Parks and Wildlife man continued:

It is going to be awfully difficult to get a boat in the water to enjoy this boating recreation unless we use a chain hoist to lower it down the side of the cliff in two of the cases, or are willing to drive your car across an exposed mud flat in the other case.⁵²⁴

Statesman, Austin; Betty MacNabb, "Injunction Halts Laneport Dam Work," June 9, 1972, *Austin American*

⁵²⁴C.C. *Allison Vs. Robert Froehlke, Secretary of the Army, et al*, No A-71-CA-84, June 2, 1972, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas, Austin, 11-12. The two cases cited refer to North Fork and South Fork dams. Also see EIS, III-9

Russell also predicted that game fishing would suffer when the lakes shut down the natural river system. When Laneport reservoir is complete, he testified, “we can expect a buildup in game fish population in the first three or four years . . . but this will rapidly decline, leaving high rough fish population and very poor fishing.”

Couldn't the lake be restocked? Doggett asked. Yes, Russell answered, but there were drawbacks.

We can go in and wait until the lake gets low at some time, and come in with chemical toxicants, Rotenone, and poison out the lake and restock at that time. If we just restock the lake without removing the high rough fish population that are in them, then, all we are doing is feeding the existing fish already in the lake. When we throw our little fish in, the fish already there just eat them up.⁵²⁵

He also noted that the dams would change the *nature* of the river's flow. He was referring to the impact of the changed flow on downstream fisheries, but his comments applied equally forcefully to the question of severe erosion along the river's banks — a point no one brought up. “When these reservoirs are constructed,” Russell told the court,

there are very seldom ever guaranteed releases from them, so your entire stream either has periods of extremely high flow that will release a great deal of water, which will come

⁵²⁵Ibid., 13

rushing down, silting in some of the holes that the fish depend on, and then they [the BRA] will cut the water out, and the stream channel will completely dry up.⁵²⁶

A second witness, geologist Riser Everett, raised eyebrows when he testified that erecting dams near fault lines such as the Balcones Escarpment, where North Fork and South Fork dams were to be constructed, was a “very hazardous undertaking.” There were two reasons for this. One could never be sure whether seismic “movement” might start again; such movement could “rupture” the dams. What was more likely was that the lakes might not hold water. Because of the extreme porousness of the Edwards Formation west of the Balcones Escarpment, the lake would probably leak, Everett testified. Worse, he said, it was likely to leak into Inner Space Caverns, the geologic “find” just south of Georgetown which had recently opened as a tourist attraction.⁵²⁷

The Army’s witnesses rebutted that Congress had authorized the dams, so there was no question of legality. They maintained that their revised environmental impact statement on the San Gabriel dams was entirely sufficient. Certainly it was fat.

⁵²⁶Ibid., 14

⁵²⁷Ibid., 36, 41. Everett testified that he had worked for Standard Oil of New Jersey for thirty years as an oil and petroleum geologist. Oil and petroleum geologists often are considered experts in underground hydrology. Under cross examination, Everett admitted that he had no prior experience with dam feasibility studies.

Delaying the project, they testified, would cost taxpayers at least \$49,000 a month — \$145,000 annually if one counted the loss of anticipated annual “benefits” from Laneport and North Fork.⁵²⁸ They argued that their projections for lake users at Laneport and North Fork was not “over-inflated” at all, as the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department was saying, but “on the low side.” Lewill “Bud” Horseman, chief planner for the Corps’ Environmental Resource Section, testified that the immediate “market area” of a lake provides eighty percent of its “day users” — the overwhelming majority of any lake’s recreational “usage.” The San Gabriel market, he said, contained “about fifty-five percent of your population right up through the center of the state, and, of course, the interstate highways make easy access for them.”⁵²⁹

Colonel William E. Wood, assistant chief of the engineering division, was drawn into making several embarrassing confessions on the stand. While testifying that the Corps had carefully checked out the suitability of each dam’s foundation through “extensive core boring” — two hundred at Laneport and fifty at North Fork — he added that it had been discovered that North Fork Reservoir “possibly” would not hold water above 791 feet above sea level, so the dam had been redesigned.⁵³⁰ The problem lay not in the Balcones fault, he said, but in the Edwards, “a very

⁵²⁸Ibid., 129

⁵²⁹Ibid., 100, 107-110

⁵³⁰Ibid., 86-87

porous formation, and it is not — will not usually hold water.”⁵³¹ Stillhouse Hollow Dam, Waco Dam, Canyon Dam — all like North Fork, very near the Balcones fault line and all on the Edwards — all had leaked, and all had required expensive reconstruction. At Waco Dam, Army engineers had experienced “a major slide” during construction, requiring an extra “four or five million dollars” to correct.

Shannon walked Wood through the story of how the Corps had altered the all-important conservation yields at the behest of the BRA, noting that water storage yields in the reservoirs had suddenly dropped a remarkable twenty-five percent in 1967. Shannon asked Wood to read from the minutes of the January 7, 1965, conference between the Texas Water Commission, the Brazos River Authority, and the Corps of Engineers.

Wood: “Colonel Wells stated that the cost of the water from these projects was considerably higher than that from any other reservoir in the Basin, and that they had gone to considerable length to negotiate water sales at these prices to the principal users in the Brazos Valley, with no success.”

Shannon: Now, isn’t it a fact that due to the redesign . . . that the amount of cost for the project allocated for water supply was reduced from approximately 44 percent to approximately 24 percent?

Wood: There was some reduction, probably in that neighborhood. I don’t know.

⁵³¹Ibid., 90-91

Shannon: In that neighborhood. Was there also an increase in the portion of the cost allocated to recreation at the same time?

Wood: There probably was, because at that time we had additional policy on recreation, and we were looked upon by Congress to put in additional recreation facilities, which we hadn't done in the earlier project.

Shannon: Was there also an increase in the percentage of cost allocated to flood control benefits at the same time?

Wood: There could be.

Shannon: Is your answer — can you make the answer more definite?

Wood: I would say yes.⁵³²

The young attorney did not say so outright, but his drift was clear: he was suggesting that the Corps of Engineers had cooked the books to meet Congress's water storage requirements for the San Gabriel dams.

Judge Roberts denied Allison and the environmental groups their request for a temporary injunction to halt the San Gabriel projects.⁵³³ One newspaper reported that the judge refused the

⁵³²Ibid., 91-93

⁵³³“Judge Refused to Block Laneport Dam Project,” *Temple Daily Telegram*, June 4, 1972, BRA; letter: Wells to Pickle, June 5, 1972, *ibid.*

injunction “ ‘solely on a time basis,’ because of the voluminous report and evidence requiring exhaustive study before a final judgment on the merits of the dam . . . can be given.”⁵³⁴ Several days later, Shannon and Doggett appealed Judge Roberts’ decision to the U.S. Fifth District Court of Appeals, asking the higher court to “stay” dam work pending a hearing on appeal.⁵³⁵ Judge John Minor Wisdom signed the temporary order, freezing the projects at the bid-letting stage.⁵³⁶ Wilson Fox fumed to Congressman Poage about the “so-called Allison case” . . .

With the unpredictable attitude of our Federal Courts I am fearful of the outcome. I can anticipate that they will stay the proceedings and return the case for trial on its merits. If we have arrived at the ridiculous situation whereby a group of environmentalists can stop progress, then I am about ready to throw in the sponge. The San Gabriel River above Georgetown flows very little, and anybody that can canoe down that River should be a very strong character with strong legs and a strong back as he would be carrying his canoe most of the way So far as the golden-cheek warblers are concerned I would not know one when I met it in the road.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴“Opponents Appealing Dam Decision,” June 8, 1972, *Austin Statesman*, *Austin Statesman* morgue

⁵³⁵Ibid., Letter, Wells to Otha F. Dent, chairman of the Texas Water Rights Commission, June 8, 1972, BRA

⁵³⁶MacNabb, “Injunction Halts Laneport Dam Work,” June 9, 1972, *Austin American*, BRA; Memo, Col. Floyd H. Henk to Prospective Bidders and Others Concerned, June 9, 1972, *ibid.*; Letter, Pickle to Wells, June 9, 1972, *ibid.*, “Nature Lovers Block Construction of \$25-Million Dam at Laneport,” June 9, 1972, *Waco News-Tribune*, *ibid.*; Memo: Wells to BRA Board Members, June 13, 1972, *ibid.*

⁵³⁷Letter, Wilson Fox to Poage, June 12, 1972, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers

A month later, a Granger farmer complained to Poage that the Army was withholding payment for land they had bought which he was supposed to vacate by January 1, 1973. Now the Corps had written that they were not sure whether “they would be permitted to complete the purchase of our land.” Laneport dam, Henry C. Rozacky Jr. wrote, “has uprooted so many people from their homes, torn up a community that cannot be rebuilt, and confused so many people to the point that they don’t know what to expect next.”⁵³⁸ Poage turned to his former colleague, Judge Thornberry of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. “This is the first time in my 36 years in Congress that I have written to a United States Judge regarding matters pending in his Court,” Poage wrote.

I don’t believe it is a good practice and yet, as one who knows something of legislative matters, you will realize that there are times when members of the Legislative Branch desperately need to know how the Courts plan to proceed. That is my problem now. I am not trying to suggest what should be done other than to point out the need for a decision.⁵³⁹

Poage described “hundreds of land owners [who] had their property taken or contracted for by the United States.” Many had “relied on commitments of the government, made payments and bought other property which they cannot pay for as long as the

⁵³⁸Letter, Henry C. Rozacky Jr. to Poage, July 16, 1972, *ibid.*

⁵³⁹Letter, Poage to Thornberry, August 4, 1972, *ibid.*

government does not pay.” Poage ended his letter to Judge Thornberry by requesting a “probable timetable” regarding the *Allison* lawsuit.

A week later, Judge Thornberry replied. After checking with other judges of the Fifth Circuit, he wrote, “I entered a stay pending consideration of the motion for injunction by a panel of this Court. We were in agreement that the case was too important to be decided without briefs.” The environmentalists’ brief already had been filed. The Army’s brief was not yet in, but when it was received, Thornberry assured Poage, “we will decide whether the case requires oral argument. If it does, we shall set it for a prompt hearing.”⁵⁴⁰

In mid-September, the Fifth Circuit Court lifted Judge Thornberry’s stay against construction of the San Gabriel projects and set a hearing date.⁵⁴¹ On November 13, Chief Judge Brown, Judge Roney and Judge Moore, on loan from the Second Circuit, heard Allison’s case in New Orleans. Appellates’ attorney Shannon recapitulated much of what Judge Roberts had heard in Austin, continuing to focus on the legality of the project and the sufficiency of the environmental impact statement. The judges seemed nettled that no trial had taken place, only a hearing. Judge Brown asked Shannon, “Why not have a full trial, then let

⁵⁴⁰Letter, Thornberry to Poage, Aug. 11, 1972, *Allison V. Froehlke* No. 72-2219, *ibid.*

⁵⁴¹Memo, Wells to General Counsel, Sept. 15, 1972, San Gabriel General, BRA

Judge Roberts decide?” On December 27, the Fifth Circuit ordered that the case be sent back to District Court for a full trial, but refused to delay the project. There matters rested. Allison and his environmental posse let the matter drop, having run out of financial support and convinced they could not win.⁵⁴²

In many respects, the environmentalists’ fears about the dams’ negative consequences were well founded. But some of their worst-case-scenarios did not pan out. No one seems to have anticipated one serious environmental consequence of North Fork dam — losing Crockett Gardens. In a canyon snaking south from the North Fork of the San Gabriel River, near the projected shoreline of the new lake, Crockett Gardens stood as an exquisite example of Balcones Escarpment and Edwards Plateau ecosystem, characterized by honeycombed limestone and thousands of underground springs. Since its development by two Anglo-American settlers in 1855 as a mill and, later, a truck garden

⁵⁴²Shannon, *ibid.* One financial contributor to *Allison v. Froehlke*, according to Shannon, was the National Resource Defense Council, which at about that time realized its attorneys were having more success stopping highways than dams. Courts, Shannon said, were “reluctant to stop projects where congressional funding had taken place,” whereas highways were funded largely through the Executive Branch, and proved easier targets.

producing strawberries and other exotic fruits and vegetables, Crockett Gardens (originally known as Knight's Springs) had been visited, painted and photographed by thousands of admirers.

At Crockett Gardens, the Edwards Aquifer sprung from the rock and plunged down steep cliffs, creating a spectacular waterfall flanked by smaller falls. Over the eons, the water had shaped the gigantic rock shoulder over which it fell, carving caves into the stepped bluffs that sheltered a vast cape of maidenhair, fiddlehead fern, velvety moss and watercress — an artist's palette of greens. In the 1950's, a rancher had built a rock ranch house and swimming pool above the falls, where the springs bubbled out of the ground. Water from the springs filled his pool and danced through dozens of rivulets that switchbacked through the property, once the Knight's Springs strawberry fields. Coming upon this scene after a short climb from Jenkins-Russell Crossing at Second Booty's, Crockett Gardens appeared like a vision of the Garden of Eden, transported to Texas.⁵⁴³

Initially, the Army engineers claimed Crockett Gardens would survive North Fork Lake. It would be the Corps' most prized possession. There was nothing official about this commitment, but that was the impression left by the Army's minions. The Army didn't mention Crockett Gardens in its environmental impact statement. Nor was Crockett Gardens mentioned in *Allison v. Froehlke*. The place, however special, could not command the

⁵⁴³Clara Scarbrough, 434-435

legal protection offered under the Endangered Species Act to a rarity like the golden-cheeked warbler. The Austin environmentalists may not have known about Crockett Gardens. If they had, they might have considered calling in Eliot Porter, the brilliant Santa Fe, New Mexico, nature photographer who had immortalized Glen Canyon before its flooding by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, inspiring nature lovers to rally and save the Grand Canyon from a similar fate.⁵⁴⁴ Depending on one's point of view, the Army engineers meant well (but failed) or anticipated trouble and launched a brilliant public relations campaign to convince Crockett Gardens lovers that the ecological jewel would remain safe in their hands.

While North Fork Dam was being built, the Corps published a four-color brochure called "North Fork Lake," featuring Crockett Gardens on the cover. "Are You Ready?" the Corps' asked.

Picture a lake surrounded by high bluffs, cool woodlands, and open meadows. Imagine walking along a trail and finding spring water cascading over limestone ledges bordered with mosses and ferns.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁴Eliot Porter, *The Place No One Knew* (1963), Sierra Club, San Francisco. Or, if Porter was not available, the Lone Star Sierra Club probably could have gotten Texan Jim Bones, who had studied under Porter and shot many stories for *Audubon* magazine, to chronicle Crockett Gardens' beauty.

⁵⁴⁵Brochure, "North Fork Lake," undated, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District

To buoy its reputation, the Corps sold North Fork Lake (later renamed Lake Georgetown) by promoting Crockett Gardens. But North Fork was, first and foremost, a flood control dam. If Corps engineers needed to raise or lower the height of the reservoir to control flooding, they would do so. That was why the Corps' environmental impact statement made the point that the lake level would fluctuate so wildly. It could have been worse. Periodically, the Corps had fended off pressure from the Brazos Water Authority to *eliminate* recreational use of North Fork Lake so the BRA could "make full use" of the stored conservation pool. That would have eliminated the beach, boat docks, camping grounds, trails, *and* Crockett Gardens.⁵⁴⁶ The truth was, North Fork Dam threatened Crockett Gardens by its very existence. After the lake opened to hikers and boaters, Crockett Gardens immediately suffered from overuse, "people languishing in the springs," as one lake manager put it. The delicate ferns and mosses were trampled; the springs started drying up. Then, in 1992, heavy rains swelled the San Gabriel River and the Corps

⁵⁴⁶Letter, William T. Moore to Department of the Army, Nov. 27, 1973, Box 59, BRA. The BRA would have preferred that the Army not hold as much water in the lake as it planned to do during the dry summer months, when downstream rice farmers needed irrigation water. The Authority was not concerned about creating a "nice" lake for boaters and swimmers; it wanted a free hand to manipulate the lake's conservation storage waters. "From our point of view," Moore wrote, "it would be better to delete the recreation pool elevation and area; however, if it cannot be deleted, the footnote should be changed to read: "Elevation and area will vary between the top and bottom of the conservation pool depending upon hydrological factors and consumers' needs."

flooded Crockett Gardens to contain downstream flooding. For four months, most of Crockett Gardens was submerged. When the Corps lowered the lake to its “normal” level, Crockett Gardens was all but dead.⁵⁴⁷

In the Seventies, Linda Crawford Graves was Georgetown’s apple-cheeked dynamo: the chamber’s “Woman of the Year,” a tenacious and widely loved do-gooder. Wags said the First United Methodist Church had *two* pastors — Linda and her husband, the Reverend Tom Graves.⁵⁴⁸ The Graves encountered the San Gabriel’s North Fork on their first Sunday in Georgetown. A church member had invited them out to “the Booty’s,” and Linda’s love affair with the river began.⁵⁴⁹ “Every free Sunday afternoon we spent out at the Booty’s with our children,” remembers Tom Graves. “We swam, picnicked, canoed, floated the river — all those things you did.” The Graves were

⁵⁴⁷Brochure, “Good Water Trail,” Aug. 1994, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District

⁵⁴⁸Interview: Jeannine Fairburn, Nov. 14, 2001, Georgetown

⁵⁴⁹It was technically incorrect to call the crossings “the Booty’s,” but nearly everyone did. In fact, they were popularly known as First, Second, Third, and Fourth Booty’s, in the order that they were met heading west from Georgetown. Their real names, however, were Booty’s, Jenkins (originally Russell), Box, and Hunt — all named for pioneers who had settled nearby. See “There is just one Booty’s Crossing,” *Williamson County Sun*, circa 1974, Georgetown.

enthusiastic Colorado campers. In Williamson County they found “great natural beauty so close at hand, and about to be lost.” Linda saw the river as “a playground for college students and for the community.”⁵⁵⁰ But she accepted the dam’s paramount local rationale: to bank water for future municipal use. “I can’t see myself throwing myself across a tree to stop it and fifteen years from now having no water,” she said in 1974.⁵⁵¹ Instead of protesting, she commissioned a movie.⁵⁵²

The San Gabriel River Crossings, filmed by a University of Texas graduate student, portrayed the North Fork and its low-water crossings before North Fork Dam stopped the river’s natural flow. Grainy and a little hokey, the movie still washes the viewer into the river, taking poetic inventory of its treasures. The camera revels in the water, which reveals itself in hues of aquamarine, tourmaline, and sapphire — so clear one can see down to the river’s smooth stone bottom. Rapids gurgle and whoosh through hairpin turns, slowing at deep swimming “holes” where children splash and dive from great boulders. Canoeists paddle purposefully, caps pulled over ears. Fishermen cast flies for black bass. Bird trillings sweeten the air. Bluebells, spiderwort, primrose and poppies tremble as the camera zooms in. Hikers gaze at high cliffs looming over Jenkins Crossing and

⁵⁵⁰Interview: Tom Graves, Nov. 15, 2001, McKinney, Texas

⁵⁵¹Interview: Linda Crawford Graves, May 1974, Georgetown

⁵⁵²Dianne Koenig, *San Gabriel River Crossings*, circa 1976, Clark Collection, Southwestern University, Georgetown

amble through Crockett Gardens. Boy Scouts pitch tents on a meadow and head off to explore, “going off like popguns in all directions.” The effect is magical. “Every visit to the San Gabriel Valley creates a mood of trenchance,” intones the narrator, “a feeling that the changes of moon and season, of weather and the work of man, could change this place in our absence, before we visit it again.”

Linda Graves died of bone cancer in November 2001, but twenty-two years after North Fork Dam rose over the San Gabriel River to regulate its yearly rhythms, her movie compels viewers to reflect on what once lived so vividly.

River Twice Dammed

Without the relentless machinations of Wilson H. Fox and Owen W. Sherrill, neither of the San Gabriel River dams could have been built. Others were essential facilitators — “Jake” Pickle and Walter Wells leap to mind — but without Fox and Sherrill, the dam projects surely would have succumbed to the fierce local opposition they inspired. Neither Fox nor Sherrill lived to savor his triumph. By the time the dams rose over the river each man

had dreamed of dominating, both had “passed on,” in the Williamson County idiom.⁵⁵³

Between the time that the Corps of Engineers began acquiring land for the dams in the late Sixties and the projects’ completion in the late Seventies, Williamson County had experienced other losses. Congressman Pickle, the dams’ political mastermind and a national legislative powerhouse, allowed the county to be dropped from the Tenth District during the 1970 redistricting process.⁵⁵⁴ Congressman Poage had taken Williamson County into his Eleventh District, rather in the spirit of a distant uncle’s taking an orphan into the family out of a sense of duty, but with little enthusiasm.⁵⁵⁵ Williamson County’s abandonment

⁵⁵³Wilson Fox died February 1974 of a heart attack on a bitter cold day while delivering a tax form to a client, according to his son, Dr. Jim Fox of Austin. See “Wilson H. Fox Services Today,” *Austin American-Statesman*, Feb. 11, 1974. Sherrill died at the age of 86 two years later. “Sherrill Services Today,” *Austin American-Statesman*, May 6, 1976, Center for American History, Austin.

⁵⁵⁴Pickle needed to shed some of the rural parts of his district due to Austin’s growth, and Williamson County got cut. Williamson County observers close to Pickle always said that the congressman could have retained the county had he fought to do so, but did not, due largely to the fact that the county never had generously contributed to his political campaigns. Or, perhaps Pickle discerned the coming “tilt” of suburban areas across the United States toward the Republican Party, a trend barely noticeable in Austin in 1970 but well developed by 1980.

⁵⁵⁵Poage’s disdain for Williamson County’s fractured political and business leadership was clear throughout the Fifties and Sixties. While he appears to have made a genuine effort to help individual Williamson County citizens (especially farmers) who needed assistance, his affection for the county and its political leaders was scant, as seen in his public discourse and private correspondence.

by Pickle foreshadowed its ultimate embrace of the Republican Party after the 1980 election of President Ronald Reagan.

Granger successfully politicked to get Laneport Reservoir renamed Granger Lake, but it didn't help the agrarian market town.⁵⁵⁶ By the time Granger Dam was dedicated in 1978, Granger was barely clinging to life. "Does the government have the right to come in and kill our town?" banker Truett Beard wondered aloud at a town meeting.⁵⁵⁷ Many of the once prosperous merchants of Davilla Street had shuttered their stores after losing their economic base — about one hundred and fifty farm families who had cultivated the fabled Black Waxy — now gone to make way for Granger Lake. The elegant Storrs Opera House had disappeared to make way for a bank parking lot. Dozens of substantial family businesses — Mikulencak's Variety and Dry Goods, Granger Gin and Farm Supply, Grainger Grain, Inc., the old drug store, even a popular beer joint — closed. The public school system lost a quarter of its students, causing state

⁵⁵⁶Laneport Dam and Reservoir was officially renamed Granger Dam and Lake by an Act of Congress on January 3, 1975.

⁵⁵⁷"Granger fights for its life," *Granger News*, Nov. 8, 1973, Box 667, File 8, Poage Papers. Beard, who relished the memory of his old relationship with President Lyndon Johnson, and former Southwest Region Internal Revenue Service Director Frank Scofield acquired Ralph W Moore's Texva Realty after Moore's death and reincorporated it as Gabriel Farms. Also see letter and enclosure, State Representative Dan Kubiak to D.L. Orendorff, Chief, Engineering Division, Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth, Nov. 26, 1973, with report by Bridgette Cavanaugh entitled "Granger Dam."

funding to drop by approximately forty thousand dollars.⁵⁵⁸ The public school's tax base shrunk by \$1.266 million as the government converted more than thirteen percent of the district's taxable property to non-taxable status, costing six teachers their jobs by 1976.⁵⁵⁹ Granger's despair was palpable. "There is a pervasive sadness in this town," the city clerk said in 1975, plucking nervously at imaginary lint on her blouse sleeve. "People are afraid."⁵⁶⁰

Taylor struggled against the tide of agricultural loss, too, as it tried to cope with its eroded status as a key transportation center, after Interstate 35 bypassed it thirteen miles to the west. In 1974 it finally got the "loop" that "Son" Bland had wanted, but not the "airline highway" to Austin it had sought since the 1950's. The 4.779-mile loop cost \$4.3 million.⁵⁶¹ The Soil Conservation Service's plan for a small dams network on the San Gabriel died

⁵⁵⁸A 1973 report written by Bridgette Cavanaugh and widely circulated by State Representative Dan Kubiak's office, cited a loss of state school funding through 1973 of \$84,658. See letter, Kubiak to D.L. Orendorff, Nov. 26, 1973, author's files.

⁵⁵⁹"Acreage Acquired by the U.S. Government for Lake Granger Project," Jan. 1, 1976, Granger Independent School District, Granger

⁵⁶⁰Interview: Betty Hajda, July 1975, Granger. The farm town's population fell from 1,256 in 1970 to 1,236 in 1980. Linda Scarbrough manuscript, *ibid.*, 5, 21, 26. In 1975, one in ten of the storefronts along Davilla Street were boarded up. In 2001, one in ten were in use. Also see letters, Herbert L. Sides to Pickle, April 26, 1967; Pickle to Sides, May 2, 1967, 95-112-181 Pickle Papers, Center for American History. In the flat lands around Lake Granger, the expected increase in market value of real estate anticipated by the Corps, Poage and Pickle did not occur.

⁵⁶¹Interview: Chris Bishop, Texas Department of Public Transportation, Feb. 11, 2002, Austin

after it became clear that two big dams would be constructed on the San Gabriel, which would partially duplicate the “little” dams’ benefits and permanently flood much of the land that would have been protected by the “little” dams.⁵⁶² Much of the San Gabriel River, and the natural habitat it sustained, soon would be permanently lost; what remained would never again flow freely, reinvigorating the Black Waxy with deposits of rich alluvial fertilizer during seasonal floods.

But the county gained, too. Round Rock shot into orbit, a rocket town aggressively pursuing a post-industrial, computer-based economy. Though its acquisition of Westinghouse Corporation did not turn on Lake Georgetown’s water, that water supply was very much the “deciding factor” in the city’s subsequent netting of an impressive string of Blue Chip companies.⁵⁶³ Overnight, it seemed, Round Rock led the county, growing five hundred percent during the Seventies, from 2,811 to about 15,000 citizens.⁵⁶⁴ Georgetown grew, too, though not nearly as spectacularly. The county seat was content to let Southwestern University, county government, and Texas Crushed

⁵⁶²Letters: A.J. Wade to Poage, Feb. 27, 1968; Poage to Wade, Feb. 29, 1968, Box 692, File 7, Poage Papers. In 1968, President Richard Nixon’s Administration clamped down on Soil and Water Conservation programs, lopping \$120 million out of a \$220 million budget, badly hurting efforts such as those by the Little River-San Gabriel Soil Conservation District to curb erosion and prevent flooding in their watersheds.

⁵⁶³Interview: Jim Hislop, July 1998, Georgetown

⁵⁶⁴1980 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics, Texas, 45-6; Hislop, *ibid.* Round Rock officially counted 12,740 citizens in 1980, but some 15,000 hooked into city utilities.

Stone's limestone stripping industry provide most local employment. An ambitious young fellow named Bobby Stanton developed Serenada Country Estates west of Interstate 35 by buying up ranches and marketing his subdivision as a country haven near a lake. It was an enormous success. Soon Stanton was developing Georgetown's ritziest neighborhoods, all in Lake Georgetown country.

The county's population doubled from 37,305 in 1970 to 76,521 in 1980, making it the fastest growing county in the Brazos River basin and the second fastest growing in Texas. The growth was concentrated west of I-35, close to Lake Georgetown's anticipated water supply, in sprawling subdivisions that became Austin's suburban beachhead. In the first four years of the Seventies, one-seventh of all county land west of the interstate, approximately forty thousand acres, passed from ranching into real estate hands; land values west of the Balcones Escarpment rose from as little as thirty-five dollars an acre to one thousand dollars per acre.⁵⁶⁵

Granger Dam was dedicated on December 1, 1978, a perfect crisp winter's day. The lake had cost American taxpayers

⁵⁶⁵Linda Scarbrough, unpublished manuscript, *ibid.*

\$62 million — nearly three times the 1958 projected estimate of \$22.2 million.⁵⁶⁶ Congressman Poage, retiring after after forty-two years in Washington, was the honored speaker. Until recently, Poage said, apparently forgetting his ardent, though mostly futile, pursuit of Laneport dam, he could not see why this particular dam was sited where it was, but now he could see the logic of it. “These engineers are able to find spots where dams are needed,” he proclaimed. Congressman Pickle, the man responsible for exhuming the dam from the Corps of Engineers’ deep freezer, beamed at Poage, along with a phalanx of dignitaries from the Brazos River Authority and the Corps of Engineers. Ray Holubec, a former BRA director from Granger who owned two farms directly below the dam, won polite applause. Wilson and Henry Fox’s brother, J. Howard Fox of Hearne, who had presided over the BRA board throughout much of the contentious fight over Granger Dam, did not attend the ceremony.

No one mentioned that the BRA had not yet been able to sell the better part of Granger Lake’s water, though it had been working hard to do so. Major General Charles I. McGinnis, the Army’s director of civil works, noted that “someday” the lake

⁵⁶⁶Letter, Lt. Col. J.H. Hottenroth, Corps of Engineers, May 23, 1958, citing House Report 2247, July 1, 1954, p. 122, National Archives, Fort Worth; Memo, Kevin McCarthy to Congressman Chet Edwards, March 20, 1993, Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth. Also see “Poage, Officials Tour Granger Dam Site,” Taylor *Daily Press*, April 13, 1979.

would provide sixteen million gallons of water per day, “when it’s needed.”⁵⁶⁷ Wilson Fox’s dream of a revitalized Taylor piping reservoir water from Lake Granger to the city’s new revenue-producing industries had not materialized.⁵⁶⁸

North Fork Reservoir was not completed “simultaneously” with Granger Dam, as Congressman Pickle had promised, but the Corps did its best. Once money for the \$38.8 million dam was flowing from Congress, the Army engineers efficiently erected the dam it had long argued would be a poor tool for controlling floods and storing water. On October 5, 1979, ten months after Granger Dam officially opened, Lake Georgetown was dedicated. It seemed, somehow, a more auspicious occasion. President

⁵⁶⁷George Ferguson, “Granger Dam Dedicated Under Clear Bright Skies,” *Taylor Daily Press*, Dec. 1, 1978

⁵⁶⁸After Wilson Fox’s death, Taylor leaders tried to convince the BRA’s General Manager Wells that their city needed *all* of Lake Granger’s water, thinking, as Georgetown leaders had thought, that Taylor could control and resell the water. But, as in Georgetown’s case, Wells “educated” Taylor against such a commitment. Wells feared the cities might not be able to make their payments on the water. Alcoa’s aluminum plant in Rockdale contracted for 5,000 acre feet on Aug. 2, 1976. On April 16, 1979, Taylor led a consortium of small towns and water supply corporations, contracting for 8,525 acre feet of Lake Granger water — about half the reservoir’s salable water supply of 16.2 million gallons per day. And in 1995, Del Webb Sun City contracted for 15 acre feet. See *Final Environmental Statement*, I-5 and Brazos River Authority Federal Reservoirs Water Revenue, Fiscal Year 1989, Box 362, BRA.

Johnson's widow, Lady Bird Johnson, got star billing, along with Congressman Pickle, who had not represented Williamson County for a decade. This time, Howard Fox attended the ceremony, along with Holubec, representing retired BRA directors. Also on the dais were Judge Homer Thornberry, former Congressman Poage, Congressman Marvin Leath, and Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall, who owned a ranch nearby.⁵⁶⁹ Georgetown and Round Rock dignitaries were out in force, along with representatives of Williamson County's west side entities that had not existed a few years before — Anderson Mill and Brushy Creek municipal utility districts and Chisholm Trail Water Supply Corporation.⁵⁷⁰

Lake Georgetown's water was all under contract; in fact, Georgetown and Round Rock had each tried to buy all of it. In the end, the two cities split the reservoir's available yield, six million gallons a day, or 6,700 acre feet a year.⁵⁷¹ Pickle spoke of the political battle over the San Gabriel River dams. "In the compromise we worked out," he told the crowd, "we assured everybody concerned that neither Georgetown nor Taylor could get one bucket of dirt or one drop of water ahead of the other.

⁵⁶⁹Joel Hollis, "North San Gabriel Dam is dedicated!" *The Sunday Sun*, Oct. 7, 1979, Georgetown

⁵⁷⁰San Gabriel Dam Dedication — North Fork Reservoir, BRA files

⁵⁷¹"Dow Chemical Company's First Request for Production of Documents and Information," *ibid.* In this 1989 statement of the BRA's water income, Lake Georgetown sales to Round Rock and Georgetown generated \$215,357 for the BRA, while Lake Granger generated \$.00 in income. The BRA had contracted with Georgetown on April 20, 1978, and Round Rock on May 2, 1978.

That's what I call working together — togetherness, Williamson County style!"⁵⁷²

It was an historic moment for Williamson County. The two dams transformed it as effectively as the Enclosure Laws had altered England.⁵⁷³ In October 1979, fifty-eight years after the 1921 flood, Williamson County finally controlled the San Gabriel River. Now Williamson County was a new place, reconfigured by a half century of maneuvering to contain the San Gabriel. Visionaries, speculators, boosters, engineers, land developers, water planners, and politicians all had a hand in the job.

In the process, they had nudged Williamson County from one world into another, from the agrarian society it had been to an incipient suburban mecca. The promise of bounteous water supplies courtesy of Uncle Sam's dams, and a Federal interstate highway that had simply showed up, did the trick. In water-short Central Texas, Williamson County had water to spare.

⁵⁷²Hollis, *ibid.*

⁵⁷³Georgetown School Superintendent Jack Frost recognized the historic importance of the dams and sent all history students to the dam dedication ceremonies. *Sunday Sun*, Don Scarbrough, "Passing Glance." Also see Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, Vol. 162, Dec. 13, 1968



Figure 34: Aerial shot of North Fork Dam, looking east along the San Gabriel. The author took the photograph.

PART II

THE ROAD

Highway Utopia

Seven years after Henry Ford's first Model T rolled off the assembly line, America's three and a half million car owners were yearning to explore the United States in their new cars. One thing held them back: outside the nation's cities, paved roads barely existed. Farmers suffered bitterly from this deficit of decent roads, foundering in muddy tracks whenever it rained. In 1916, Congress passed the path-breaking Federal-Aid Highway Act, which encouraged state governments to plan and construct a network of modern primary highways by offering to pay fifty

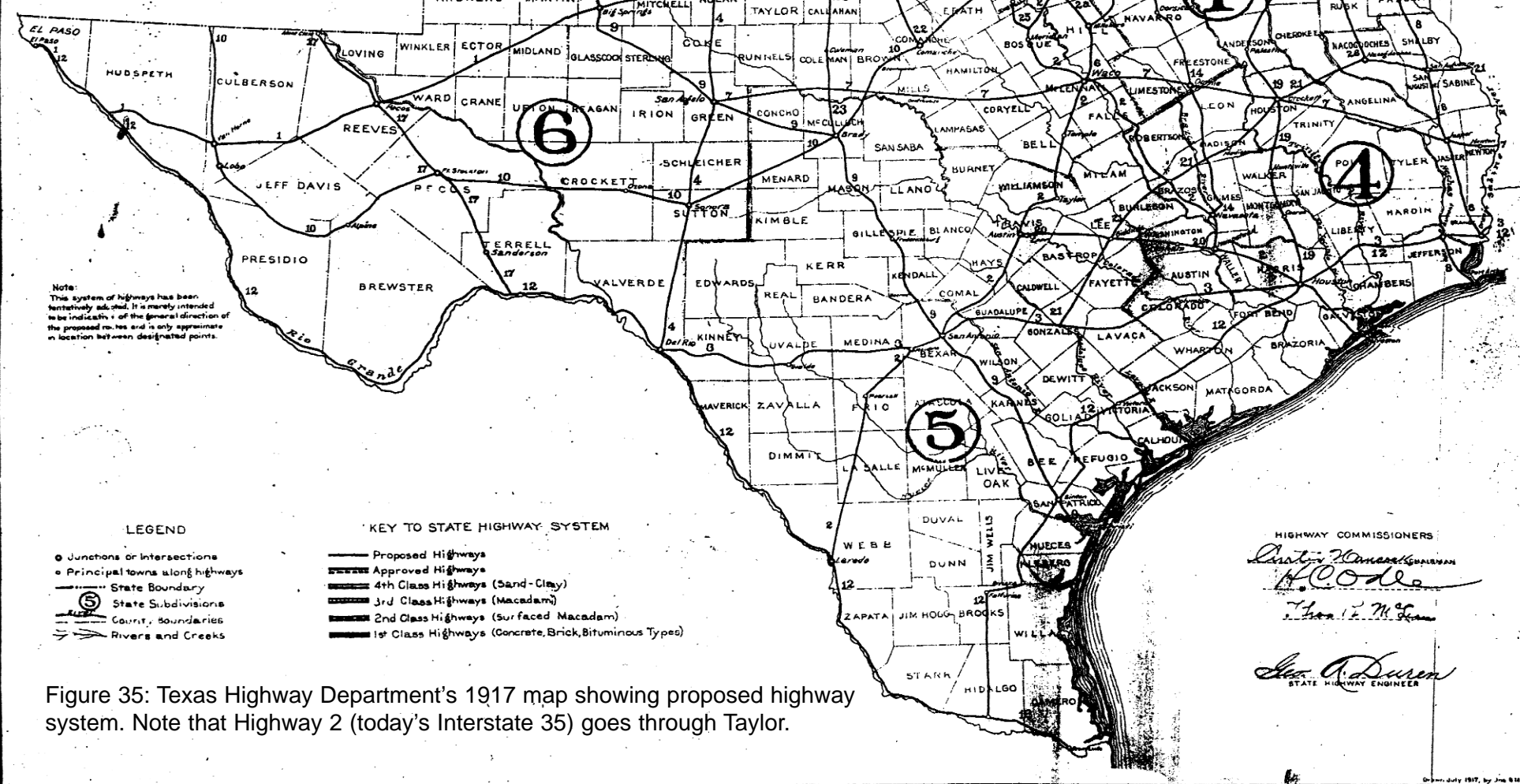
STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF STATE HIGHWAY ENGINEER
AUSTIN, TEXAS

MAP SHOWING PROPOSED SYSTEM
OF STATE HIGHWAYS

AS ADOPTED JUNE 1917

- NAMES OF HIGHWAYS**
- 1 TEXARKANA, DALLAS, FT. WORTH, AND EL PASO
 - 2 MERIDIAN
 - 3 GULF DIVISION
 - 4 SOUTHERN NATIONAL
 - 5 DEL RIO - CANADIAN
 - 6 NORTH TEXAS
 - 7 KIND OF TRAILS
 - 8 CENTRAL TEXAS
 - 9 EAST TEXAS
 - 10 FURK - SQUIB - BULL
 - 11 FT. WORTH - BRADY - FT. STOCKTON
 - 12 JEFFERSON
 - 13 JEFFERSON DAVIS MEMORIAL
 - 14 OZARK TRAIL
 - 15 DALLAS - HOUSTON
 - 16 DALLAS - LOUISIANA
 - 17 FT. WORTH - OKLAHOMA
 - 18 PICOS VALLEY
 - 19 ALBANY - BRONCO
 - 20 PARIS - HOUSTON
 - 21 AUSTIN - HOUSTON
 - 22 BONZALES - SAN AUGUSTINE
 - 23 WICHITA FALLS - COMANCHE
 - 24 SOUTHWEST TRAIL
 - 25 DENTON - WHITEBORO
 - 26 MERIDIAN - MINERAL WELLS BRANCH
 - 27 TYLER - NACOGDOCHES
- Texasiana to El Paso
Burkburnett to Laredo
Waco to Galveston
Orange to Del Rio
Del Rio to Ochiltree
Texarkana to Tuxedo
Denison to Waco
Newton to San Angelo
Boston to Fort Arthur
Corpus Christi to Amarelle
Ft. Worth to San Home
Denison to Marshall
Orange to El Paso
Tuxedo to Wheeler
Dallas to Houston
Dallas to Longview
Ft. Worth to Gainesville
Montclair to Ft. Stockton
Albany to Bronco
Paris to Houston
Austin to Houston
Gonzales to San Augustine
Wichita Falls to Comanche
Burkburnett to Laredo
Denton to Whiteboro
Henrietta to Meridian
Tyler to Nacogdoches

- COMBINATION HIGHWAYS**
- HENRY EXALL MEMORIAL No. 6 Denison to Dallas, No. 14 Dallas to Houston
No. 2 Houston to Galveston



Note:
The system of highways has been tentatively adopted. It is merely intended to indicate the general direction of the proposed routes and is only approximate in location between designated points.

- LEGEND**
- Junctions or intersections
 - Principal towns along highways
 - State Boundary
 - State Subdivisions
 - County boundaries
 - Rivers and Creeks
- KEY TO STATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM**
- Proposed Highways
 - Approved Highways
 - 4th Class Highways (Sand-Clay)
 - 3rd Class Highways (Macadam)
 - 2nd Class Highways (Surfaced Macadam)
 - 1st Class Highways (Concrete, Brick, Bituminous Types)

HIGHWAY COMMISSIONERS
Arthur Hancock
H. C. Code
Thomas M. G. G.
Geo. A. Duren
STATE HIGHWAY ENGINEER

Figure 35: Texas Highway Department's 1917 map showing proposed highway system. Note that Highway 2 (today's Interstate 35) goes through Taylor.

percent of the cost.⁵⁷⁴ A year later, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Highway Department, which outlined its dream scheme for roads to knit together the state's far-flung agrarian society.⁵⁷⁵ Highway engineers mapped twenty-five primary highway routes, including one, Highway 2, eventually known as Texas' "Main Street" or U.S. Highway 81.⁵⁷⁶ Heading south from the Red River, it split into two veins through Fort Worth and Dallas, then rejoined and flowed along the Balcones Escarpment through Waco, Austin and San Antonio. It ended at Laredo, where the United States met Mexico at the Rio Grande divide.⁵⁷⁷

Eighty-five years later, most Texas drivers would instantly recognize proposed Texas Highway 2. It was identical to what became Interregional Highway 35 — with one exception. In Williamson County, Texas Highway 2 coursed through Taylor. In 1917 that made perfect sense. Taylor was the premiere market center between Austin and Waco; the Black Waxy that it crossed sustained prosperous King Cotton towns — Waco, Temple, Holland, Bartlett, Granger and Taylor — lined up neatly along the

⁵⁷⁴Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway — Superhoax* (1970), Ballantine Books, New York, 22-23; *Highways and the Nation's Economy* (1950), Joint Committee on the Economic Report, U.S. Congress, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 13

⁵⁷⁵*New Handbook of Texas* (1996), "Highways," Vol. 3, Texas State Historical Association, Austin

⁵⁷⁶Thomas E. Turner, "Main Street of Texas," *Texas Parade*, Vol. 13, Texas State Archives

⁵⁷⁷Map, "Proposed System of Texas Highways," June 1917, State Highway Department, Texas Department of Transportation, Austin

Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad.⁵⁷⁸ Taylor's reputation as the "world's greatest inland cotton market," its intersecting interstate rail systems, and a burgeoning industrial sector made it an essential cog in the state's market system. Seventy-five hundred people lived there.⁵⁷⁹ Granger and Bartlett, ten and fifteen miles to the north, were booming, with nearly four thousand people combined. At least two thousand more farmed the Black Waxy within Taylor's market grasp.

By comparison, in 1917 Georgetown and Round Rock were lightweights. The county seat's twenty-eight hundred residents largely depended on the courthouse and Southwestern University for employment; Round Rock was a village of nine hundred inhabitants. Both towns serviced nearby farm and ranch families, but these were lightly scattered west of the Balcones Escarpment compared to the county's densely cultivated east end.⁵⁸⁰

Texans wanted good roads. Bad roads were the farmers' bane, and farmers were the backbone of Texas's economy. The highway department's battle cry ricocheted across the state: "Get the farmers out of the mud!" And everyone else, too. In 1910, a

⁵⁷⁸The Katy Railroad was the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas line, owned by Jay Gould and linking Central Texas black land cattle and cotton interests with Fort Worth and Dallas markets. See Clara Scarbrough, 324.

⁵⁷⁹Herbert G. Willson, "Taylor, Black Land and Cotton," *Texas Magazine*, Feb. 1911, Houston; brochure: "Taylor and its . . . Opportunities," Taylor Chamber of Commerce, 1940, Williamson County Scrapbook, Center for American History; Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 346.

⁵⁸⁰Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*

quartet headed by M.C. Cooke took off from Granger early one morning and drove a two-cylinder Buick five hundred miles to Plainview. The men camped and cooked their meals by the roadside and hugged the railroad tracks in case their car broke down. It didn't, but the journey took four days.⁵⁸¹ A couple of years later, nineteen-year-old Margaret "Peg" Tegge eloped from her home near Granger with gin owner Auburn Stearns to marry in Austin. It was a rainy day, and Stearns had to stop four times to repair punctures and pry the tires out of the mud. The thirty-mile trip lasted all day.⁵⁸²

In July 1919, after the Great War had ended, General John J. Pershing dispatched a young lieutenant named Dwight D. Eisenhower to lead a convoy of army vehicles across the country to demonstrate the military's capacity for quick movement. If Pershing hoped to dramatize the woeful state of America's highways, the demonstration succeeded. Eisenhower's caravan spent sixty-two days crossing the continent from east to west. Often, there were no roads at all. The young Army officer never forgot the experience.⁵⁸³ In the Twenties, suburban towns

⁵⁸¹*Texas Highways*, *ibid.*

⁵⁸²Interview: Margaret Tegge Stearns, 1975, Taylor

⁵⁸³David Osborne, "The Asphalt Bungle," *Inquiry*, Oct. 1981, 14

multiplied outside America”’s cities and automobile sales exploded. Twenty-three million autos were on the road by 1923.⁵⁸⁴ In Germany, work started on a radically designed *autobahn* that allowed drivers to zoom along at speeds up to one hundred miles per hour, little worrying about vehicles entering or leaving the highway. On this side of the Atlantic, America’s first limited-access highway, the Bronx River Parkway, opened in the mid-twenties, inspiring New York’s master builder, Robert Moses, to web his city with parkways and expressways.⁵⁸⁵ But country roads remained atrocious. In Williamson County in 1927, a bus carrying the Baylor University basketball team was “struck and torn to bits” by the International & Great Northern’s Sunshine Special on its way from Mexico City to St. Louis at a rail crossing in Round Rock. “Ten of the twenty-one occupants [were] hurled into eternity in the twinkling of an eye,” a reporter wrote. “Only the Carnage of a Battlefield Could Equal Scenes as Strong Men Weaken At The Sight Before Them,” the newspaper headline read.⁵⁸⁶ Texans were outraged, and Round Rock got a new arched bridge that surmounted the railroad tracks. The Texas Highway Department focused on paving a network of rural roads, crucial to the Black Waxy farm economy of Williamson County.⁵⁸⁷ The

⁵⁸⁴Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker* (1975), Vintage Books, 144

⁵⁸⁵John Robinson, *Highways and Our Environment* (1971), McGraw-Hill, New York, 48-49

⁵⁸⁶*Sun*, January 28, 1927, Georgetown

⁵⁸⁷Texas highway builders, most of them trained at Texas A&M, astutely adapted the macadam road-building technique by using local

farm to market road was king. Texas highway engineers were heroes.

The Depression killed auto sales and rural road building.⁵⁸⁸ In 1934, architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed Broadacre City, a utopian alternative to the nation's existing rural, urban and suburban patterns. Beautiful limited-access, six-lane freeways connected tight "high-rise" villages divided by an unspoiled agrarian landscape. In Wright's scheme, the people who lived in Broadacre Cities could choose between skyscraper homes in the town center or individual "organic" dwellings next to farm land. They could walk to work and attend Beethoven concerts at night. To make all this workable, Wright thought, the U.S. government should give every American a one-acre plot of earth — and an automobile — as a birthright.⁵⁸⁹ Wright never could sell his utopian dream, but his splendid highways, upon which drivers could not encounter on-coming traffic, may have influenced other transportation designers, like Norman Bel Geddes, whose model of a monumental limited-access, fourteen-lane superhighway traversing America was the hit of the 1939 World's

materials, such as caliche or shell, or asphalt layered with tar, to form a weather-proof surface that would stand up to truck or auto traffic. The process was developed by the Scottish engineer John L. MacAdam. See T.U. Taylor, "Country Roads," *Bulletin of the University of Texas*, March 1890, Center for American History.

⁵⁸⁸*Highways and the Nation's Economy*, *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁹Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (1958), Meridian, New York, 126-127, 146, 198-199; Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1997), Phaidon Press, London, 243, 245-247. Originally Wright designed Broadacre City as part of a New York exhibition, but he continued trying to sell the concept for many years.

Fair.⁵⁹⁰ Certainly the *autobahn* was part of both designers' thinking, but they gave it their own twist. President Franklin Roosevelt invested in highways mainly to boost employment, with no integrated transportation plan in mind. But after World War II, during which the German *autobahn* had proven a military jewel, U.S. leaders began considering construction of a vast interregional highway network. They had the automobile and trucking industries, the expanding suburbs and deteriorating cities in mind, along with military needs. Congress passed the Defense Highway Act in November of 1941, asking each state to plan and coordinate such a system with its neighbors.⁵⁹¹ In 1944 Congress backed an interregional expressway system, but failed to agree on a plan that was workable, so the concept lay mouldering in highway engineers' offices.⁵⁹² In Texas and up through the Middle American states, one scheme rose in the popular imagination: a multi-lane, high-speed, Canada-to-Mexico expressway.⁵⁹³

⁵⁹⁰Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited* (1979), Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 189, 194-195, 201-206. Geddes designed General Motors' Futurama exhibit, which took place in a building that looked like a giant carburetor.

⁵⁹¹Mark H. Rose has exhaustively detailed the political development of the U.S. interstate highway system in his history, *Interstate* (1979), University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville. I relied on chapter two for much of this section.

⁵⁹²Rose, *ibid.*, 22-28

⁵⁹³Letters: Gibb Gilchrist to Tim T. Warren, Canada to Mexico Highway Association, July 14, 1932, Box 1185, Texas Department of Transportation. Gilchrist was the Texas Highway Department's first highway engineer. The Canada to Mexico Expressway theme recurs in highway department correspondence during the mid-

During the Depression, Williamson County's agrarian population shrank, as many people departed for city jobs. It shrank a little more during World War II, when many youths joined the armed services.⁵⁹⁴ But the Black Waxy held most of its farming families. Most of the Czech-Americans near Granger and Taylor continued living on their land and near each other. The war helped Taylor, largely through the strength of Taylor Bedding Company. Then, too, the International and Great Northern and the Kansas-Texas-Missouri rail lines met in Taylor and moved tons of agricultural products and heavy equipment.⁵⁹⁵ Taylor was a center for meat shipping because of its proximity to cattle ranches and its rail facilities, boasting three meat-packing plants and numerous barbecue and beer joints.⁵⁹⁶ But some Taylor businessmen worried that after the war, their city's assets might erode.

These businessmen knew the highway department was drawing maps for a new four-lane divided highway, part of the

1940s as interstate routes were being discussed. See, for instance, a letter from the Pryor, Oklahoma, Chamber of Commerce to the Texas Highway Department August 18, 1945, *ibid.*

⁵⁹⁴Clara Scarbrough, *ibid.*, 345-346

⁵⁹⁵The K-T-M rail line was affectionately called the Katy.

⁵⁹⁶"Taylor and its Opportunities . . .", *ibid.*, 7-7, 19

proposed interregional system, that would pass through Williamson County, either along State Highway 28 (later it became State Highway 95) through Bartlett, Granger and Taylor, or U.S. Highway 81, one of the state's primary trunk lines, through Georgetown and Round Rock, or somewhere in between.⁵⁹⁷ Williamson County movers and shakers fretted about what route the interregional would take, for it was clear that just as the railroads had created and destroyed towns, the superhighway would do the same. The Black Waxy was all Williamson County had. If the new interregional gave it a wide berth, no one could imagine the consequences.

Taylor leaders were keenly aware of these possibilities. In 1940, the Texas Highway Commission appointed a new chief engineer with strong ties to Taylor. His name was Dewitt C. Greer.⁵⁹⁸ Greer had a special fondness for Taylor. It already was a rail transport hub; it seemed likely to favor highway development as well. With eight thousand people and a diverse industrial base, Taylor was the most important city within Austin's orbit. Its business community was politically sophisticated, frequently inviting state bureaucrats to take an evening off to dine on T-bones and imbibe beer at the Taylor Country Club. But Greer's

⁵⁹⁷State Highway 28 is now designated State Highway 95. See "Official Map of the Highway System of Texas," Jan. 1, 1934, Box 1185, Texas Department of Transportation; "Official Road Map, South Central Texas," circa 1940, American Automobile Association, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁹⁸Richard Morehead, *Dewitt C. Greer* (1984), Eakin Press, Austin, 41

Taylor links were personal, too. He enjoyed dealing with Howard “Son” Bland Jr., the affable offspring of a pioneer founding family whose chief mission in life became good roads — especially a road linking Taylor direct to Austin.⁵⁹⁹ And he was close with John M. Griffith, Jr., who had inherited City National Bank and was a respected civic leader. Greer’s older brother, Marcus, was married to Griffith’s sister; the families were intimate.⁶⁰⁰ Both of these connections would shape Taylor for decades — in the minds of Taylor burghers, and in the ribbons of asphalt that were laid around the town.

⁵⁹⁹Unpublished obituary, “Howard Bland Jr.,” Taylor Public Library Archives

⁶⁰⁰Telephone interview: Ed Griffith, August 17, 2001, Taylor. Ed Griffith is the son of John M. Griffith. A fourth Griffith generation is now in charge of the independently owned City National Bank — Ed Griffith, Jr. Also see *Central Texas Business and Professional Directory* (1950), Centex Publications, Austin, Center for American History, 233.

Taylor's Interstate?

The World War II years gutted Williamson County's rural roads, especially east of the Balcones Escarpment, where county roads thickly cross-hatched the Black Waxy as if by a spiderweb woven by an arachnid gone crazy. The highways were a mess. One drive north from Granger to Temple was all it took to break the axle on a truck or ambulance.⁶⁰¹ State Highway 95 was a ruin, turning to sodden mud that could devour cars when it rained, or splitting into deep hard fissures during the heat of summer.

⁶⁰¹Hearing, Texas Highway Commission, Judge Sam V. Stone, Williamson County, April 13, 1943, Box 1329, Texas Department of Transportation

Taylor wanted Texas 95 fixed. Taylor also plugged relentlessly for an “airline” route to Austin — a straight shoot, rather than the existing circuitous path that dragged cars and trucks across a one-lane bridge and through Round Rock.

No one knew where the interregional, or Canada to Mexico superhighway, as it was often called, would slice through the county, assuming it got built. For that matter, no one could imagine what such a highway might look like, not having traveled to Europe and laid eyes on an *autobahn*. In 1944, the county’s one officially designated “primary” highway was United States 81, Texas’ Main Street from Dallas to San Antonio, which sent traffic through the hearts of Georgetown and Round Rock. But a strong case for an alternative interregional route could be made: build it through Taylor, straight through the populous Black Waxy, where most of Williamson County’s people lived and money got made.

Only a handful people in Williamson County even knew that a superhighway was on the drawing board. Talk of interregionals was limited mostly to Washington government circles, Texas highway engineers, and people whose businesses involved trucking, automobiles or new housing. In the Forties, and even through the Fifties, the average Williamson County citizen valued local farm roads above all else. There were hundreds, built and maintained by a cash-strapped county government. After all, few drove to Austin to work. A trip to “the city” was reserved for weekend adventures. Traffic was scant. The most congested road

in Texas lay just northeast of Fort Worth, where State Highway 121 intersected State Highway 183; average daily volume there was 32,150. The highest traffic count in Austin was 6,287 vehicles a day.⁶⁰² At least seventy percent of Williamson County's thousand mile road system lay east of the Balcones Escarpment, converting the small farms owned by Czech-, German- and Swedish-Americans into rural ethnic neighborhoods as clearly defined as any grid city's.⁶⁰³ A 1940 road map of eastern Williamson County shows a tight pattern of over two hundred squares, triangles and rectangles of agricultural land bounded by county roads, reaching ultimate density on the Black Waxy; west of U.S. 81 fewer than a dozen county roads existed. These followed the flow of the San Gabriel's North Fork and Brushy Creek, and colonized some farm plots between Florence and Andice.⁶⁰⁴ It was all the county could do to keep the roads passable. Texas counties were pressed harder after the 1941 Federal-Aid Highway Defense Act passed, when the Texas Legislature decided that the *counties*, not the state, should foot the bill for the proposed interregional system's considerable right

⁶⁰²*Texas Highways Fact Book* (1959), Texas Highway Department, Austin, Center for American History

⁶⁰³Telephone interview: Jerry Mehevec, former Williamson County commissioner, Jan. 27, 2002, Taylor

⁶⁰⁴Map, Williamson and Lee Counties, No. 9. July 31, 1944, Docket No. 4, State Highway Commission, Box 1327, Texas Department of Transportation

of way. It was the only state in the Union to insist that counties pay a share of the coming interstates.⁶⁰⁵

In Taylor, as Wilson Fox led the pro-Laneport reservoir forces, Howard “Son” Bland led a gentle assault on the State Highway Department, not only to construct what amounted to a new State Highway 95 between Taylor and Temple, including replacing the “nightmare” bridge at Circleville, and to build a new “airline” highway to Austin, but also for a “bypass” loop highway around Taylor and relocation of State Highway 102 between Taylor and Lexington, which amounted to a new road.⁶⁰⁶ Bland peppered Greer and other road engineers with cheerful but persistent letters until his death in 1952.⁶⁰⁷ Afterwards, the Taylor-Austin “airline” highway was a lost cause.⁶⁰⁸ But the highway department did build a four-lane divided highway “loop” around Taylor at a cost of \$4.3 million, greatly enhancing Taylor’s reputation within the highway lobby realm.⁶⁰⁹ Bland’s

⁶⁰⁵“A Program for Texas Highways,” 1959, Texas Research League, Center for American History

⁶⁰⁶Memo regarding Texas Highway Commission meeting, July 31, 1944, *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷Letters between Greer and Howard “Son” Bland, 1950-1951, Box 1511, General Files, State Highway Department, Texas Department of Transportation. At the age of sixty, Bland died of a heart attack on Jan. 3, 1952, leaving Taylor bereft of its “all-time outstanding citizen, according to the Taylor *Daily Press*.

⁶⁰⁸Taylor floated the idea of an “airline” highway to Austin again in April, 1964 — but was shot down at the highway department. By that time, Taylor leaders feared losing not only Interstate 35, but also the Laneport reservoir to Georgetown. See Wray Weddell, Jr., “Travis Cool To Airline Highway,” *Austin American-Statesman*, April 14, 1964, 8

⁶⁰⁹The exact figure, according to the Texas Department of Transportation, was \$4,323,370.

long-sought Highway 95 improvements, including a new bridge at Circleville, were completed.⁶¹⁰

Across Williamson County, the result of all this talk about “superhighways” — with references to “loops” and “bypasses” and “expressways” — was confusion. There were so many schemes and rumors in the mill — a new interregional highway that could run through Taylor or Georgetown or somewhere in between, a combined highway and dam bridging Georgetown if that became the interstate’s route, a new toll road connecting Dallas and San Antonio whose path remained a mystery, Taylor’s ambitious bundle of projects, including a new highway to Austin — that the confusion became part of the story.⁶¹¹

The confusion was compounded by the county’s ongoing battle with the State of Texas over rights of way for the new interregional highway, which under state law the county had to purchase. From 1944 until 1956, County Judge Sam V. Stone refused to buy a foot of right of way until he was certain of the interregional’s route through Williamson. By 1954, every other county on the interregional’s route between Dallas and San

⁶¹⁰“Dallas Firm Bids Low On Circleville Bridge,” Jan. 11 1956; “Re-Routing Of Highways Through Taylor Proposed,” Feb. 24, 1956; “On-The-Ground H’way Surveys Begin Here,” June 6, 1956; Taylor *Daily Press*; Griffin Smith, “The Highway Establishment and How It Grew,” *Texas Monthly*, April 1974, Austin, 84, 91-91; Interview: Tom Bullion, May 12, 2000, Taylor

⁶¹¹The proposed toll road supposedly would have split the distance between Georgetown and Taylor. It popped up frequently in newspaper accounts in the mid-1950s, but then vanished from public discourse.

Antonio had completed its rights-of-way purchases, but Judge Stone held out, earning the wrath of the Texas Good Roads Association and attracting negative press attention.⁶¹² He continued to resist buying right of way for Interstate 35 until 1956, after the Federal government agreed to pay ninety percent of the cost of the interstate system. The Texas Highway Commission then ruled that Texas counties would not have to pay for right of way after all. The Federal government would take care of it.⁶¹³ Throughout the standoff, the sagacious Judge Stone argued that Williamson County did not know the precise route of the interstate, that even if the route were known, the county did not have half a million dollars to buy three hundred feet of right of way along the interstate's path, and that "the people of Williamson County would not even think of passing" a bond to pay for it. "This is not a local road," he insisted.

It is designed as a national highway and for national defense . . . This is not a local proposition at all. Instead of helping the towns, the new highway will carry traffic *around* them.⁶¹⁴

⁶¹²Letters: Ike Ashburn to Sam V. Stone, Sept. 29, 1954, Stone to Ashburn, Sept. 30, 1954, Dewitt C. Greer to Stone, Oct. 1954,

⁶¹³"A Program for Texas Highways," 1957, Texas Research League, Austin, Center for American History

⁶¹⁴"Thornberry Supports County H'way Problem," July 21, 1955, *Taylor Times*. Judge Stone was widely respected in Williamson County and was reelected without trouble for many years. Part of his winning political philosophy, according to Georgetown banker Jay Sloan, was to attend every funeral in the county. Interview, Sept. 11, 2000, Georgetown.

Judge Stone's refusal to cooperate saved his county a great deal of money, but it also drew attention to the fact that the interstate's route was not fixed through Williamson County — though by the late Forties, highway engineers agreed it would more or less follow U.S. Highway 81. But local confusion lingered about the final route, especially in Taylor, whose leaders had long believed that Taylor would lie on the path of the ultimate superhighway between Dallas and Austin. In the midst of post-war optimism about creating a modernized Williamson County — one dripping with crystalline lakes and bucolic farmers and industrial wealth and jet-shaped cars swooping to Austin — the multitude of new highway possibilities during the Forties and Fifties hopelessly muddled the truth about whether Taylor did, or did not, shove the national defense highway twelve miles off its original track, over to the lightly settled west side of the county.⁶¹⁵

Urban myths powerfully affect how people feel about places. Such a myth dogs Taylor, and occurs in several forms. When talk of the interregional highway first got around, so the story goes, several of Taylor's leading lights decided that a limited-access expressway would hurt the town. It would punish farmers, cutting up their fields

⁶¹⁵It helps to remember who Williamson County's congressmen were during this period — Lyndon Baines Johnson, a proven winner of federal largesse, and Homer Thornberry, who was no slouch in Congress himself. That sort of representation, coupled with Texas' powerful congressional delegation, gave District Ten's constituents reason for optimism.



Figure 36: Dewitt C. Greer



Figure 37: John H. Griffith



Figure 38: Drawing of Taylor Bedding Company, maker of the famous Morning Glory Mattress.

and breaking road connections. It would threaten Taylor Bedding Manufacturing Company, maker of the famous Morning Glory mattress, which required a healthy supply of low-wage workers. It had them bottled up in a nearby neighborhood composed of African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. For these people,, commuting to Austin for higher-paying jobs was not an easy option. But with a free chute to Austin, who knew what might happen? The city's cheap labor pool might vanish.⁶¹⁶ Several Rice's Crossing farmers felt that a four-lane divided highway with few access points would ruin their ability to get to their crops. A state highway was one thing; an interstate quite another. It was huge, requiring three hundred feet on either side. A farmer might face a twenty-mile drive to get from one end of his field to the other, not being able to "cut across" an interstate highway. In the two versions of Taylor's urban myth, either Taylor Bedding founder David Fontaine Forwood or Rice's Crossing grower Mahon Garry called on Taylor banker John Griffith to ask his highway czar in-law Greer to kill the interstate through Taylor. That, supposedly, is what happened.

⁶¹⁶Interview: Municipal Judge James Miles: Sept. 21, 1999, Taylor. Miles' story, which he got from several Taylor's old-timers, suggests a similar circumstance related by David Montejano in his excellent *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* about how South Texas Anglo farmers tried to limit the mobility of their Mexican workers. For fear of their laborers deserting the fields at the wrong time, the farmers consistently opposed the "good roads" movement and discouraged car ownership by Mexicans, preferring to haul them around in trucks. See 200-201.

Yet another version of the story is so delightfully outrageous that it has become one of Williamson County's cherished courthouse myths: Taylor's "powers-that-were" so detested the notion of an interregional highway that they threatened to "steal" Georgetown's courthouse. Georgetown's "powers-that-were" had to agree not to put up a fight in Austin if the interregional ran through their town, along U.S. 81 — otherwise, Taylor would take the courthouse away from Georgetown by forcing a county-wide election, which Taylor could win.⁶¹⁷ That move supposedly shifted Interstate 35 ten to fifteen miles west, to U.S. Highway 81 and through Georgetown and Round Rock.

Did Taylor's urban myth reflect a semblance of reality? Dewitt Greer's records bear no hint of any chat with banker Griffith that might have changed the path of Interstate 35.⁶¹⁸ Of

⁶¹⁷Interview: Gene Fondren, March 9, 2000, Austin. Fondren, formerly Wilson Fox's law partner, said the respected Rice's Crossing farmer Mahon Garry was the lynchpin for opposition among the farmers. Fondren represented Williamson County in the State Legislature and for many years has been chief lobbyist for the Texas Automobile Dealers' Association. He remembers Williamson County District Clerk Stiles Byrom as being the source of the story about Taylor threatening to "steal" the courthouse.

⁶¹⁸Dewitt C. Greer Papers, Texas Department of Transportation, Austin. A thorough search produced no scrap of evidence along these lines.

course, Greer and Griffith probably would not have written each other on such a matter. If Griffith did approach Greer, he would have picked up a phone and called him.⁶¹⁹ Virginia Forwood Lawrence, heir to Taylor Bedding, thinks the story that her father blocked Interstate 35 from coming through Taylor is bunk. “He would have told me. He trained me to take over the business, and he told me everything,” she said. “I’ve never heard the story.”⁶²⁰ Mahon Garry’s son, Mahon “Buzz” Garry, has heard it “all his life,” but “I never heard Daddy talk about it.” The version his father told him had Forwood blocking the highway.⁶²¹ A long-time Taylor city attorney, Tom Bullion, doesn’t believe the story. “If there had been a big discussion in the city I would have known about it, and I don’t remember any,” he said. “But if they did turn it down, they made a terrible mistake.”⁶²² A life-long civil engineer who came to Austin in 1946 with the U.S. Bureau of Roads to work on the interregional project thinks the interstate route always followed U.S. Highway 81. “I don’t think [an

⁶¹⁹Interview: Ed Griffith: August 17, 2001. “I’ve heard rumblings about this rumor, but not from Dad,” he said in a telephone conversation. “It’s certainly possible. I just don’t know.” Griffith’s official Williamson County correspondence from that era does not reveal any letters between Griffith and Greer.

⁶²⁰Interview: Virginia Forwood Lawrence, March 28, 2000, Taylor

⁶²¹Telephone interview: Mahon “Buzz” Garry, April 5, 2000, Austin

⁶²²Interview: Bullion. But Bullion did not arrive in Taylor until April 1956, and the general U.S. Highway 81 route of the interstate was determined in the late nineteen-forties. In May 1949, Henry Fox wrote a piece (“Super-Four-Lane Bridges At Georgetown Without Holes In Them To Solve Dam Situation Is Reader’s Suggestion”) in the Taylor *Times*, reprinted in the May 22, 1949, Williamson County *Sun*, citing the route as following U.S. 81.

alternative route] was ever considered,” said Ralph Rich. “Unless it was in someone’s mind.”⁶²³ Then there is the nagging question, Why on earth would Taylor leaders kill the interstate while pressing for a direct “airline” highway to Austin? Or were there two opposing camps in Taylor?

But Taylor did rate as a serious prospect for the interregional’s route, at least during the earliest thinking about the grand road. During a 1944 Texas Highway Commission hearing, Greer and Judge Stone kicked the subject around as part of a larger discussion about where rights of way were likely to occur and whether the highway department should build a new Taylor-to-Austin “airline” highway, if the interregional was going to connect the two cities anyway. The proposed interregional between Austin and Waco “would cross U.S. Highway No. 79 at a point near Taylor,” a highway department memo informed commissioners before the meeting.⁶²⁴ During the public session, the following conversation clearly indicated that no final decision had been made as to the interstate highway’s path through Williamson County. However, the map Chief Engineer Greer used to illustrate the “Proposed Interregional” highway marked the Williamson County route as passing from Bartlett to Granger, crossing State Highway 79

⁶²³Interview: Ralph Rich, March 31, 2000, Austin

⁶²⁴Memo: Staff to Texas Highway Commission, July 31, 1944, Number 4, District 14, Box 1327, Texas Department of Transportation

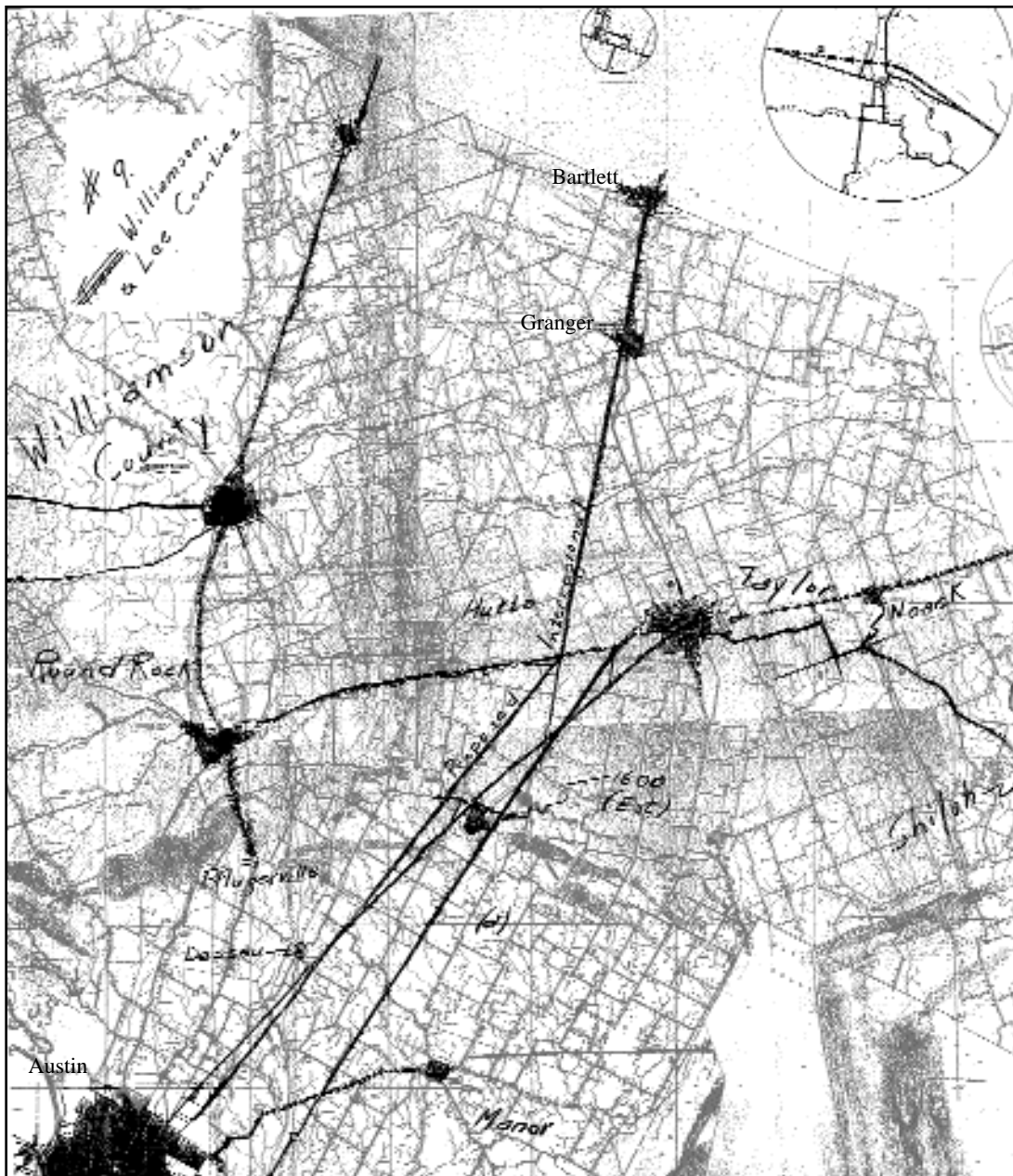


Figure 39: Dewitt Greer's 1944 map of the "Proposed Interregional" through Williamson County. It follows Highway 95 through Bartlett and Granger, turns slightly west and crosses Highway 79 three miles west of Taylor. Note also two possible "airline highway" routes from Taylor to Austin.

about three miles west of Taylor, and then veering southwest to Austin.⁶²⁵

MR. GREER: From Temple to Austin we have been studying the matter of a regional highway; we find we would serve about the same number of people and the same travel distance to Austin [by bringing it through Taylor].

JUDGE STONE: That 79 traffic comes through there.

MR. GREER: Our idea was when and if an express highway is built through it should take the place of one of these roads, otherwise we would have three highways.⁶²⁶ The direct route is up through here (indicating on map).⁶²⁷

JUDGE STONE: Where does that proposed interregional highway cross the I & G N?

THE CHAIRMAN: It would be way west of Hutto, it wouldn't miss Georgetown by more than five or six or seven miles.⁶²⁸

JUDGE STONE: Would you expect to serve Granger? You know you have a road proposed on up to Temple. Does this interregional strike Temple under the plan now? Then it would take the place of your road from Granger in there, wouldn't it?

⁶²⁵Transcript: Texas Highway Commission hearing, July 31, 1944, 20-22, *ibid.*

⁶²⁶The three highways would have been U.S. 81, State Highway 95, and the interregional highway.

⁶²⁷Greer's map shows a Granger-Taylor-Austin line marked "Proposed Interregional."

⁶²⁸Brady Gentry was chairman of the Texas Highway Commission, though he is not named in the transcript. His description of where the interregional would cross State Highway 79 does not square with Greer's map, which shows it crossing halfway between Hutto and Taylor. Had it crossed where Gentry indicated, it would have struck south Williamson County almost exactly where the currently proposed I-35 "reliever" loop, State Highway 130, will pass.

MR. GREER: It ought to be either one way or the other.

THE CHAIRMAN: In my opinion it [the interregional] will stay over on this other location.

JUDGE STONE: On 81?

THE CHAIRMAN: In my opinion it will. You have Belton and Georgetown on this route and on the other route you only have Taylor.

MR. WILLIAMS: And Belton.

The chief engineer's map showed no mark — no indication — of a “proposed interregional” along U.S. Highway 81 through Williamson County, though that highway's route is highlighted.⁶²⁹ Greer's concept seems to have been in synch with the State Highway Department's 1917 state highway system design — the one showing Highway 2 (now Interstate 35) exactly as it developed, except through Williamson County. Today, a few Texas Highway Department old-timers remember Taylor's urban myth. “Oh, yes,” said Texas Department of Transportation's chief spokesman when the subject was brought up. “Originally, Interstate 35 went through Taylor.”⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹Map, Williamson and Lee Counties, *ibid.*

⁶³⁰Interview: John Hurt, March 22, 2000 and Jan. 24, 2002, Texas Department of Transportation, Austin

Does it matter? In the end, Greer's "Proposed Interregional" highway did not come near Taylor. Thus, some argue, it is a non-story. But the new highway changed everything it touched, and much it didn't. Had it rolled by Taylor, as Greer's 1944 map showed, Taylor, rather than Round Rock, would surely have continued to be Williamson County's leading city. Today Georgetown would be worrying about decline rather than grappling with growing pains.⁶³¹

Meanwhile, a shift of seismic importance to Texas' agrarian core took place. In the late 1940s, the highway department's interest in farm-to-market roads started to wane. In 1946, the Texas Legislature created a dedicated Highway Fund, which meant that the road engineers never had to go begging again.⁶³² For all practical purposes, they could choose their own projects. By 1947, energy that once had focused on rural transportation needs was refocused on more dramatic projects, such as urban expressways and the interregional system that some day, the highwaymen hoped, Washington would give them the money to build. The days when farmers were kings of the road were finished, though few realized it. Attempts in the 1947 and 1949

⁶³¹It is possible that Hutto would have flourished more spectacularly than Taylor had I-35 passed between them, but that seems doubtful, given the political and economic sophistication of Taylor during the Fifties and Sixties.

⁶³²The Highway Fund was the brainstorm of the Texas Good Roads Association. It put a percentage of the gasoline tax into a fund that could never be used for anything but building highways, "liberating," as Griffin Smith wrote in *Texas Monthly*, the Highway Department to pick and choose its projects. Ibid.

Legislatures to protect the state's farm to markets failed. Afterwards, the politicians pretty much left the engineers alone.⁶³³ Chief Engineer Greer's reputation for honesty and technical excellence maintained the "liberation" of the Texas Highway Department from the usual political bothers. The superhighway had won.

If Taylor's power brokers did manage to shift the interregional highway twelve miles west, they pulled off a coup that scores of larger and theoretically more powerful American cities failed to pull off when they tried to alter *their* interregional's routes.⁶³⁴ It seemed to parallel how Taylor leaders successfully lobbied for a wildly unpopular flood control reservoir, which a small number of heavy hitters thought indispensable to Taylor's future. With regard to both federal works projects — the dams and the interstate — Taylor believed it could alter them to suit its needs. Georgetown, too, led by the unstoppable Owen Sherrill, overcame the Army Corps of Engineers' (and Taylor's) opposition to get its own reservoir built near Georgetown.

⁶³³Ibid.

⁶³⁴At the proposal stage, the interregionals' routes caused consternation in nearly every city it approached. If it ran through the center of a large city, as it usually did, the neighborhoods nearly always objected; if it bypassed a small town, as it usually did, business interests fretted that the downtown would die. In Texas, Galveston and San Antonio residents heatedly objected to the loss of old neighborhoods and cherished parks, and land owners tied the project in knots over Waco's Interstate 35 route.

In short, Williamson County's political and business elites *expected* to control and shape their futures. They almost uniformly believed in the American dream of small-town "can-doism," buttressed by political "pull" and big government assistance. There were few doubters; the doubt crept in later. At mid-century, the power was local, in the hands of the muscled elite, and to hell with state and regional and federal plans, unless they could be turned to local advantage.

The point of Taylor's urban myth is that, whether true or not, fifty years later Taylorites accept it — or believe it easily *could* have happened. Most believe in the power of their former leaders and lament its loss. They may shake their heads at the thought that their city's legendary public servants doomed a rich vein of economic development, but still they tell the tale with glee. Shortly before she died, Ruth Mantor, Taylor's most revered elder citizen, didn't know whether the tale was true or not, but she approved of it. "Thank goodness it didn't happen," she said of Interstate 35's proposed route through Taylor.⁶³⁵ Others sense Austin nipping at Taylor's outer flanks, hopscotching along Highway 79 from Hutto and Pflugerville. When it arrives, they think they will be well served by the delay afforded by the fact that Taylor was given a wide berth by Interstate 35; they saw and

⁶³⁵Interview: Ruth Mantor, Oct. 29, 1999, Taylor. The Texas Legislature named Manter a "Texas Treasure" about a year before her death.

learned from what happened to Round Rock and Georgetown after the interstate swept through.

In this vision of the future, Taylor's horde of charming historic homes and leafy neighborhoods are perfect candidates for gentrification, along the lines of Austin's Hyde Park and Georgetown's "Old Town." But Taylor always has held industry in high regard. It will continue to attract solid industrial concerns. The Black Waxy will convert nicely into inexpensive "starter-home" subdivisions; farmers can finally cash in. It will be a healthy mix, topping out at fifty thousand people. I-35's traffic problems, noise, accidents, crime, ugliness and pollution will be safely distant. Austin will swallow Georgetown and Round Rock, and Taylor will dominate Williamson County once again. In this view of Williamson County, the power of Taylor's old ruling elite prevailed.⁶³⁶

⁶³⁶This paragraph is drawn from dozens of interviews with Taylor residents, county watchers and my own observations. In the end, it is an optimistic scenario for the year 2020.

Round Rock's "Desire Line"

Sometimes a hero spontaneously rises from a community. Round Rock's hero was Louis N. Henna. In 1956, Henna owned two automobile dealerships and a great deal of real estate. He was lord and mayor of his town. Henna had moved up the hard way. During the Depression, he started working for a filling station; in 1932 he borrowed money from General Motors to start an auto dealership. Company officials were horrified when

they realized they had agreed to bankroll a seventeen-year-old boy, but Henna made the deal stick.⁶³⁷

He was a brilliant promoter. In 1938 he erected the “world’s largest road sign.” It read, simply, “Henna Motor Co. Round Rock,” and faced U.S. 81 where drivers could goggle at it. To emphasize the sign’s size, Henna parked a 1937 Chevy in front, reducing the boxy automobile to the visual size of a child’s toy.⁶³⁸ The press dubbed him a “modern Midas,” but what Round Rock most admired about Henna was his generosity. When the little town needed a dentist, he built a modern dental clinic, advertised in the *Texas Dental Journal*, and recruited one. When the Lutheran orphanage shut down, Henna, a God-fearing Baptist, deeded over one hundred and twelve acres of farm land he owned and gave two hundred thousand dollars to build the Texas Baptist Children’s Home at the intersection of U.S. 81 and 79. When it opened in 1950, sixty children of all religious faiths moved in.⁶³⁹

⁶³⁷Interviews: Billie Sue Henna Cariker, Sept. 14, 2000, Round Rock; Sloan, *ibid.*; Whitlow, *ibid.*

⁶³⁸Noel Grisham, ed., *Round Rock Texas U.S.A.!!!* (1972), Round Rock Kiwanis Club, Sweet Publishing Co., Round Rock, 38. Henna’s widow, Billy Sue Henna Cariker, grinned when recalling that sign. “Mr. Henna said there was enough board feet of wood in that sign to build a five-room house!” she said.

⁶³⁹Jimmy Banks, “Louis Henna: Hobby: Orphans,” *Texas Parade*, 1950, Vol. 11, Texas State Archives, Austin; “The Texas Baptist Childrens Home, Round Rock,” *Central Texas . . . Business and Professional Directory*, circa 1952, Centex Publications, Austin, Center for American History; Billy Sue Henna Cariker, *ibid.*



Figures 40, 41: Louis N. Henna, left, erected the “world’s largest road sign” to advertise his car dealership in Round Rock.



“People just swarmed to Louis Henna. He was like a magnet,” recalls an admirer. “Before anybody did anything, they’d say, ‘Let’s go down and talk to Mr. Henna.’ If Mr. Henna was not for it, I wouldn’t advise you to try to do it.”⁶⁴⁰

In June 1956, the fifteen-year debate over the form and funding of the long-proposed interstate highway system was resolved. It helped that a popular President Dwight D. Eisenhower was pushing for it, on military grounds, which seemed freshly relevant with Soviet aggression on the rise.⁶⁴¹ Congress gave the system a new moniker — the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways — and gave something to all the disputing lobbies (trucking, rural, urban, and military). But mostly, Congress provided money. The key factor that lubricated the final bill’s passage was the Federal government’s pledge to pay ninety percent of the cost. The states or “local” governments would pick up the rest. It was thought that the 41,000-mile interstate system would cost twenty-five billion dollars and could be built in ten years.⁶⁴² A supporter of the interstate legislation justified it with what had become mainstream thinking:

⁶⁴⁰ Whitlow, Sept. 20, 2000, *ibid.*

⁶⁴¹ Most people credit Eisenhower for thinking up the interstate system, but it was an old idea, supported by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

⁶⁴² Rose, 92-94. Ultimately, the cost exceeded \$100 billion. The system was mostly, though not entirely, completed by the mid-1980s, when many parts of it were becoming overwhelmed by traffic. See David Luberoff, “A Tale of Two Tables,” *Governing*, May 1997, 80

America lives on wheels, and we have to provide the highways to keep America living on wheels and keep the kind and form of life that we want.⁶⁴³

Cars and expressways were seen as tickets to freedom critical to the American democratic way; it was unthinkable to question them.⁶⁴⁴ Even more than the rest of the country, Round Rock was obsessed with cars. In the fall of 1956, the town of fourteen hundred had three car dealerships — Henna “No Stuttering We Trade” Motor Company, “Rocks-in-His-Head” Todd Motor Company, and Henna Chevrolet.⁶⁴⁵ A dozen filling stations, automotive repair shops, and eating joints lined the U.S. Highway 81 strip, which coursed straight through downtown, arching over the railroad tracks where half of Baylor’s basketball team had died in 1927. U.S. Highway 79 tied the northern boundary of Round Rock to Taylor, intersecting Highway 81. Louis Henna owned two corners of that key intersection, having given the third corner to the Baptist Children’s Home.⁶⁴⁶ The new

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 69. Humphery made this comment on May 2, 1955.

⁶⁴⁴“Texas Highways: 2000 A.D.,” *Texas Highways*, Vol. 9, No. 5, May, 1962, 13-15; Speech: Greer, “The Future of Highways and Highway Transportation,” Pacific Regional Conference International Road Federation, Sydney, Australia, March 3, 1961, reprinted in *Texas Highways*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March, 1961, 15

⁶⁴⁵Henna Motor Company was owned by Billy Henna, Lewis’s brother, but most felt that Lewis was the dealership’s guiding hand. Lewis Henna moved Henna Chevrolet to north Austin on Interstate 35 in 1966; Todd Motor Company, owned by Jesse Todd and financed by Georgetown banker Grogan Lord, was sold and became Leigh Motors.

⁶⁴⁶Interview, Bill Todd, Sept. 14, 2000, Round Rock; Whitlow, *ibid.*; Cariker, *ibid.*

interstate's route would make or break people, whether they ran a Texaco station or owned hundreds of acres of ranch land. Round Rock businessmen knew what they wanted: the interstate should run right through the center of town on U.S. 81, locally called Mays Street, so their traffic-dependent businesses would not fail.⁶⁴⁷

Henna didn't own the local newspaper. He didn't need to. The four-page *Leader* was dominated by car, truck, and oil and gas ads.⁶⁴⁸ In a town and in a time like this, ads carried great weight. The autumn months of 1956 were harsh times for Williamson County. The drought had forced Congress to extend the Soil Bank Act, which paid farmers not to plant crops and gave emergency relief to ranchers. Cattlemen celebrated as Congressman Thornberry explained the extension as "an effort to help farmers and ranchers hold onto their foundation breeding herds."⁶⁴⁹ Round Rock's leading bank, Farmers State, had \$1,651,363.53 in deposits; the beloved Round Rock Cheese Company (a favorite stop for U.S. 81 wayfarers) announced it was closing for good. Robertson Steak House served Thanksgiving dinner for \$1.25; the Clay Pot Cafe dished out a half-pound barbecue steak or southern fried chicken, pear and cheese salad, stuffed potatoes, English peas in cream sauce or Corn O'Brien, hot rolls and butter, coffee or iced tea, and peach short cake for

⁶⁴⁷Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸See Round Rock *Leader*, Aug. 30-Nov. 22, 1956

⁶⁴⁹Ibid., Sept. 29, 1956

eighty-five cents.⁶⁵⁰ The man who would become Round Rock's leading sleight-of-hand artist at attracting industry, Norman G. "Bunky" Whitlow, introduced the public school to a new "magic machine" — a tape recorder. "A whirling spool of magnetic tape is giving entertainment at lunch . . . and adding spirit to activities at Round Rock High School," the *Leader* reported on page one.⁶⁵¹

Readers of the *Leader* might have missed another item, since it was buried inside, surrounded by ads and school news from Jollyville. On November 8, 1956, the newspaper published a letter that Helen Irvin, president of the Round Rock Historical Association, had sent to Dewitt Greer at the Texas Highway Department. In it she had expressed the group's dismay at the proposed routing of the new interregional highway "through the portion of town known as 'Old Round Rock' or 'Old Town.'" On behalf of her organization, she asked that the highway department resurvey the prospects, "looking to the rerouting of U.S. 81 outside the western corporate limits of the City of Round Rock." All the road engineers had to do was move the interstate half a mile west of its present route, which would swing it around

⁶⁵⁰*Round Rock Leader*, Oct. 18, 1956

⁶⁵¹*Ibid.*, Nov. 1, 1956

residential Round Rock. She suggested that readers sign a petition to be sent to the highway commission.⁶⁵² It was all very low key. (Except for two angry letters to the editor opposing the historical group's efforts, the matter was never again mentioned in the *Leader*.)

The Round Rock Historical Association's troops were townswomen, but Colonel W. Ross Irvin, a retired World War II cavalryman, inspired and commanded its maneuvers.⁶⁵³ In 1950 he and his wife, Helen, had purchased the imposing hundred-year-old Washington-Anderson House, its limestone blocks chiseled by a mason imported from Sweden. The "Wash" stood two stories tall and overlooked Brushy Creek.⁶⁵⁴ The Round Rock Historical Association's board listed the distaff side of many of the city's leading "establishment" families, and the wives of several retired Army officers, veterans of battles in the Philippines and the Far East, who followed Irvin to Round Rock in the early Fifties.⁶⁵⁵ The group, which became known as the "army colony," came almost *en masse*, investing money and energy buying and restoring 1850-era limestone "wrecks" as homes. In

⁶⁵²Letter: Mrs. W.R. Irvin to D.C. Greer, Oct. 21, 1956, Box 1329, Texas Highway Commission, Texas Department of Transportation.

⁶⁵³Todd, *ibid*.

⁶⁵⁴Todd, *ibid*.

⁶⁵⁵The group's president was Helen Irvin, wife of Colonel W. Ross Irvin. Vice president was Mrs. T.E. Nelson, who was married to the powerful banker and land owner. Other officers and directors included Mrs. W.J. Walsh, Mrs. L.S. Landrum, Mrs. H.N. Egger, and Mrs. Robert Carlson. It is said that Helen Irvin approached Louis Henna's wife, Billy Sue Henna, and invited her to be the group's president. Mrs. Henna declined. The story cannot be confirmed.

addition to the Irvins, General T.F. and Mildred Wessels purchased and renovated eight acres and a Spanish colonial-style house on Brushy Creek near the Highway 81 and Highway 79 intersection; Colonel William N. and Nan Todd restored the old “Mexican Schoolhouse” perched on a hill above Brushy Creek, and Colonel Alex B. and Ruth MacNabb resurrected an 1855 four-room cottage, with fifteen-foot ceilings and four fireplaces, on the north bank of Brushy Creek just opposite the rock for which the town was named. Old Town had captivated them all and they began inviting their well-traveled friends to visit. The friends fell under its spell.

A scheme evolved. ⁶⁵⁶ Williamsburg, Virginia — Texas style — was the model. The raw material existed. West of “New” Round Rock, a village of stone buildings mostly built in the 1850s sprawled along Brushy Creek and on hilly dirt roads, in virgin state. The Old Town (originally called Brushy Creek) had flooded in 1900, and the village had ceased to be a place where the wealthy lived or conducted business. By 1956, the army colony had restored several of these “ruins” and had purchased others, planning to restore them as well. Old Town boasted a romantic history. The Great Seal of Texas and the Texas Archives had lodged there for a time, when Houston threatened to snatch the Capitol away from Austin. Two celebrity desperadoes had sauntered Old Town’s streets. In town planning to rob a bank,

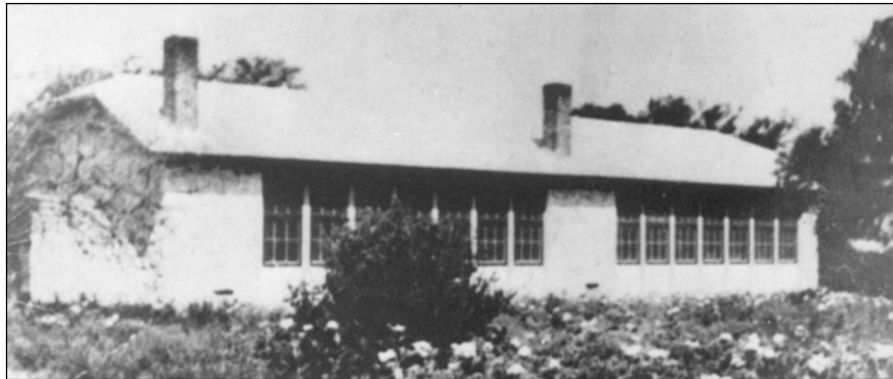
⁶⁵⁶Todd, *ibid.*

Sam Bass (“Robin Hood on a Fast Horse”) was wounded in a gun battle and died at the Round Rock Hotel. John Wesley Hardin, son of a circuit-riding Methodist minister, attended Greenwood Masonic Institute in Old Town before going on to murder twenty-seven men.⁶⁵⁷ As for a supply of tourists, Austin’s proximity was a plus. The new interstate — *if* it safely circumvented Old Town — would provide a never-ending supply. Helen Irvin wrote,

. . . in the years to come, Round Rock can be made a mecca for tourists due to the happy circumstance that most of the buildings in Old Town can be restored as homesites of an antebellum era. Texas has few areas so rich in tangible historic assets as Round Rock. Businessmen in Williamsburg, Virginia and Natchez, Mississippi do not have to be told today of the monetary reward that such areas bring. Our western neighbor, Taos, New Mexico, has been particularly successful in extracting the tourist dollar Round Rock’s charm, like that of Williamsburg, Virginia, lies in the character of the village as a whole. With a large expressway booming through its midst, the character of the village will change, in fact, die.

Artfully, she appealed to Greer’s masculine engineering mind. She wrote of tourist dollars and incentives and safety features and structural engineering, and then she massaged the chief engineer’s ego. “Please remember that we are women and

⁶⁵⁷Irvin to Greer, *ibid.* Clara Scarbrough, *Land of Good Water*, 289, 298; Grisham, *ibid.*, 4.



Figures 42-45: Colonel and Mrs. W.N. Todd, upper left, pose at their restored Round Rock home. Originally, it was the "Mexican Schoolhouse," center, when Hispanics were segregated from Anglos in Texas. The same house restored, left. Another home, above right, was restored by Colonel and Mrs. A.B. MacNabb.

not engineers!” she wrote.⁶⁵⁸ What she did *not* mention was that early in 1956, before the Interstate Act was passed, highway department officials had met with Mayor Henna and several Round Rock businessmen to determine the new interstate route. The Round Rock men wanted the interstate to slice straight not through downtown, but the engineers advised against it, since its three hundred foot right of way would gut the business district. A consensus had formed that the best solution would be to keep the interstate as close to downtown as possible. That would drive it through Round Rock’s Old Town, several blocks west of Highway 81. This route collided with the army colony’s restored homes and the Round Rock Historical Association’s plans for a Texas Williamsburg. But it kept the interstate from completely bypassing the town, as it would at Georgetown. The highway department’s preferred route pegged the U.S. Highways 81 and 79 intersection, where Mayor Henna owned two corners, as the major Round Rock exchange for the interstate. That, of course, would considerably enhance the value of Henna’s property.

The highway department’s preferred route was hardly unique; this sort of giant path regularly carved through American cities throughout the interstate system’s quarter-century buildout. At mid-century, with little experience to guide them, highway engineers and city planners believed it best to ram interstates right through the hearts of big cities and to “bypass”

⁶⁵⁸Irvin to Greer, *ibid.*

smaller towns. The Texas Highway Department established what it called a “traffic desire line” to help make that decision. The rule of thumb was that if a city had one hundred and fifty thousand residents, the interstate would head through downtown. Smaller cities were supposed to be “skirted.”⁶⁵⁹ If a smaller city didn’t object, however, or was powerless, such as Jarrell in Williamson County, the engineers might bulldoze straight through town. It depended on the engineering surveys. The process was more fluid than advertised. In Texas, the highway department generally got what it wanted.

Helen Irvin requested a special hearing before the Texas Highway Commission. She and Colonel Irvin lined up some impressive support. They got a thumping endorsement for their cause in the San Antonio *Express*, triggering “indignant” and “shocked” letters mailed to Greer’s office from San Antonio and

⁶⁵⁹The theory posited that the interstates would pull suburban drivers into the cities’ central business districts if the highways ran close to the cities’ cores, and that interstates would rehabilitate the poor and/or minority neighborhoods through which they often ran. Both theories proved witless. Numerous books have analyzed the results of these theories, focusing mostly on urban areas, among them Ben Kelley’s *The Pavers and the Paved*, Lewis Mumford’s *The Highway and the City*, Helen Leavitt’s *Superhighway — Superhoax*, Tom Lewis’s *Divided Highways*, and John Robinson’s *Highways and Our Environment*. Also see “The Public Eye,” *Texas Highways*, Aug. 20, 1960, 20

elsewhere.⁶⁶⁰ The Irvins got strong backing from the Austin Heritage Society and briefed a committee of the Texas Historical Survey.⁶⁶¹ Helen visited with Williamson County Judge Stone, who was impressed. He wrote a letter on her behalf to the Highway Commission's chairman, which hinted there might be problems with the interstate right-of-way process in Round Rock. Still, he maintained a careful neutrality:

I am directing your attention to the route of the Interstate Highway through the small historic village of Round Rock, Texas. Before the Federal-Aid for the procurement of right-of-way was approved, your Interstate Highway Engineer, Mr. Travis Long had laid out and prepared deeds for this route through Round Rock, changing the present route of Highway No. 81 from the business district to a residential section of the village, which passes through a recently improved area, intersecting two small parks and passing very near several old land marks, some of which have been restored and passing through some which likely will be restored if said right of way does not interfere.⁶⁶²

Judge Stone felt certain that the Commission would want to hear the "committee of ladies" from Round Rock "who are so interested in this location." A hearing was set for November 21. Round Rock's City Council sent a strong resolution favoring the proposed highway department route, and the Chamber of

⁶⁶⁰Lucile Stewart Krisch, "Work Threatened," *San Antonio Express*, undated but obviously written in November, 1956, with attached letters to Greer and his replies.

⁶⁶¹Letter to the Editor: Round Rock *Leader*, Nov. 8, 1956; Krisch, *ibid.*

⁶⁶²Letter: Stone to E.H. Thornton, Jr., Oct. 31, 1956, Box 1329, Texas Highway Department, Texas Department of Transportation

Commerce sent a surprisingly weak resolution.⁶⁶³ Ed Bluestein, chief engineer for District 14, who was in charge of building the interstate through Williamson County, shot off a letter to his chief, Greer, defending “what we think to be a splendid location” through Round Rock. At first, Bluestein explained, the route was supposed to go east around Round Rock, but “rapid and costly development in that area precluded a route as originally planned.” Now, bowing to a “minority group” to loop the highway west of city limits “would involve us in innumerable complications.” He noted that his engineer, Travis Long, had met with the Round Rock City Council

and a group of business men . . . several months ago at a time when he presented them with a right-of-way map and deeds officially requesting them to acquire the right-of-way. That was the policy at the time. The City Officials and business men almost unanimously approved our location This group is certainly not in concurrence with the group opposing our proposed location, this latter group being largely retired military personnel presently living in the Round Rock area.⁶⁶⁴

In a postscript, Bluestein added the clincher. “Incidentally,” he wrote Greer, “our proposed route . . . through the Round Rock

⁶⁶³Letter: Henna to Greer, Nov. 14, 1956; Minutes, City of Round Rock, Nov. 13, 1956; Letter, Round Rock Chamber of Commerce to Greer, Nov. 14, 1956, *ibid.* The Chamber’s resolution dodged the central issue. It read, in its entirety, “A motion was made and seconded that we go on record that the Chamber of Commerce cooperate with the City of Round Rock and with the Texas Highway Department in securing a route through Round Rock for the new highway.”

⁶⁶⁴Letter, Ed Bluestein to Greer, Nov. 14, 1956, *ibid.*

area has already received approval of our Road Design Division and the United States Bureau of Public Roads.” The Bureau of Public Roads was the ultimate authority. In other words, the deal was done. It could be undone, but that would cost time and money, assets that Chief Engineer Greer hated to waste.

For all practical purposes, the Texas Highway Commission hearing was a put-up job. As always, a highway department memorandum prepared commission members for what to expect. It squeezed the Round Rock Historical Association’s reason for protesting into four short lines. Then the typed memo continued for another full page, summarizing Bluestein’s arguments, reprinting the Round Rock City Council’s and Chamber of Commerce’s resolutions, and detailing the advantages of the department’s proposed route. It would, the memo stated, utilize investments previously made in U.S. Highway 81, adequately combine service to local businesses and through traffic, and easily connect to U.S. Highway 79. The memo concluded with a recommendation: “that the [Round Rock] delegation be carefully heard and the matter be reviewed again in executive session,

leading to a decision to reaffirm the route as established by the District Engineer and his staff.”⁶⁶⁵

Considering the hurdles she faced, Helen Irvin, flanked by Nan Todd and Milly Wessels, scored some impressive points. Chairman E.H. Thornton, Jr. of Galveston repeatedly reminded Irvin that this hearing did not count; whatever came out of the day’s proceedings, another hearing would have to be held — one inviting all Round Rock citizens to participate. That would be wonderful, Irvin replied. Her group welcomed a public hearing during which all possible routes — east around Round Rock, west around Round Rock, and through Round Rock — could be discussed by everyone. She presented a petition, signed by sixty-six people, a surprising number of them major players (or their wives) in Round Rock, who

dislike the present proposed routing of U.S. 81 and the way it has been forced upon us without discussion We do not feel fair consideration has been given to all sides. We do know that your engineers and our Mayor, Louis Henna, and the City Council agreed on the present route. However, interested citizens did not have the opportunity to voice their opinions.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁵Memorandum: Highway Department Commission, Nov. 21, 1956, Williamson County, District 14, *ibid.*

⁶⁶⁶Speech: Helen Irvin, Nov. 21, 1956, *ibid.* The petition was something of an afterthought. Irvin told commissioners she had been “surprised” at the response. If her group had gone from house to house, she thought there would have been “hundreds” of signatures. As it was, the petition was signed by many of the most powerful women — and a number of their spouses — in Round Rock. The names included Mr. and Mrs. Will Wilson, Mrs. Tom E. Nelson, Petrenella McConico, Dick Mayfield, Howard and Lee Nora

She reminded the commissioners of the highway department's written policy of bypassing small towns. Georgetown was larger than Round Rock, and it would be bypassed. "We most earnestly request a bypass," she said. She told the three commissioners that the interstate would

render impracticable the restoration of many of the historical buildings and homes of Round Rock. Most of these were erected in the 1850's, and Round Rock is one of the few places in Texas that has as many of these buildings. The Heritage Societies of Texas, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the State Historical Survey, and many other organizations are trying to preserve these historical sites . . . and to make them known to scholars and tourists.

The proposed expressway, she said, would require "either underpasses or overpasses in dealing with two railroads, and at least two roads within the City of Round Rock, and a four-lane bridge over Brushy Creek." It would destroy two churches, the American Legion Building and "ruin" the Legion Grounds and Old Settlers Park. Milly Wessels added that the right of way would come within nine feet of her property. When Chairman Thornton pointed out that would increase the value of her property, Wessels told him she didn't care about the value. She just wanted to live peacefully in her house. Irvin listed ten "advantages" of a western bypass around Round Rock:

Bible, Ann Abell Behrens, Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Prewitt, Mr. and Mrs. L. S. Landrum, and Mr. and Mrs. H.N. Egger — most of them old Round Rock families.

1. Traverses lower cost land.
2. No high bluff to bridge on north entrance over Brushy Creek.
3. No town lots to purchase.
4. No expensive buildings to condemn, such as the American Legion Hall and churches and homes.
5. No damages to historical sites.
6. More level terrain.
7. Will allow for greater industrial expansion of the area.
8. No town streets to consider as crossways.
9. Eliminates one railroad crossing.
10. Will not violate general expressway policy of bypassing small towns.

She was correct on every point. The two real problems with the western “bypass” option were: U.S. Highway 79 would have to be extended about half a mile (not an insurmountable task but one the road builders wished to avoid), and, for the most part, Round Rock businessmen were terrified of any plan to move the interstate away from the town’s center, fearing they would lose business. Certainly, the potential value of Henna’s Highway 79-Highway 81 intersection property would be greatly diminished. Though the commissioners had been prepared to rubber-stamp Greer’s plan, Irvin’s presentation sparked what seemed to be genuine interest on the part of at least. Herbert C. Petry, Jr., of Carrizo Springs, seemed almost smitten with Irvin. Several times, he intervened to soften Chairman Thornton’s language or to restate Irvin’s point to his fellow commissioners. The fact that the delegation was composed of “ladies” may have cut both ways.

Thornton spoke as if the protesters were thick-witted; but Petry came across as a gallant defender. Irvin herself implied that the status of the women in her group did not quite measure up to that of their husbands'. She told Thornton,

. . . it was hard for us to come today; when we know that the City Council and the Mayor have approved the proposed route it makes it embarrassing for our husbands to protest because they hate to get involved, but we did not feel we had a fair voice in the matter before it was decided.⁶⁶⁷

The commission retired to executive session. If another public hearing was held, no record exists. Dewitt Greer's file on the Round Rock interstate route ends with Helen Irvin's pleading.

Interstate 35 sliced through Old Town, cutting a deep gash through College Hill, which rose up from Brushy Creek's north bank.⁶⁶⁸ The army colony's vision of a Texas Williamsburg died. (Other small towns did successfully pursue that vision: Salado and Fredericksburg, for example.) "The highway ended up running right smack through my Daddy's front yard," lamented

⁶⁶⁷Transcript: State Highway Commission, Nov. 21, 1956, *ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸It was not completed through Round Rock until 1968, the last stretch completed in Williamson County.

Bill Todd, son of Colonel William N. and Nan Todd. The “Mexican schoolhouse” they restored was not particularly old, but it was pleasing, a long limestone structure lined with multi-paned floor-to-ceiling windows. The Todds constructed an addition which formed an “L” opening onto an enormous shell-encrusted limestone patio.⁶⁶⁹ “It was the most beautiful patio,” Todd said, his eyes misting. “Sitting there, you could see these beautiful sunsets. You could see from our house to Fort Stockton, except for the barbed wire. There was nothing in between.”⁶⁷⁰

Most evenings, cocktails were served on the patio. “I remember Travis Long, the district engineer who was in charge of building the interstate, came by our house regularly at five o’clock,” Todd said. “He knew he could get a drink there. My father and he became pretty good friends. All our friends had wicker baskets they packed with food, and every evening, they would congregate on somebody else’s patio. It was a very pleasant little town in those days.”

Bill Todd’s young family lived at the Schoolhouse with his parents for a time. “We just walked to town,” he remembers. “It was about a mile. Our kids used to traipse down Highway 620 with two little dogs chasing them.” The Wessels sold their property to the First United Methodist Church, which built several structures that wrapped around the house, concealing it

⁶⁶⁹*Round Rock Texas U.S.A.!!!*, *ibid.*, 122. The original “Mexican School” was built in 1934 by Texas Relief Commission workers.

⁶⁷⁰Todd, *ibid.*

from the highway. A cluster of magnificent oaks shelters the patio. It is easy to see why the place attracted the Wessels, who had lived in the Far East. It resembles the colonial bungalows of South Australia's Barossa Valley. The Irvins lived at the "Wash" until they died. Their daughter, Harriet Rutland, inherited it and followed their path, restoring several Old Town structures.⁶⁷¹ The "Wash" is now the keystone office building in a complex called Heritage Center on U.S. Highway 79. In the early 1970s, the MacNabbs sold their 1855 Brushy Creek cottage to Edward Don Quick, a commercial real estate broker who grew up hunting arrowheads along Brushy Creek. Quick purchased it for his wife, Jeannie, while she was in hospital giving birth to a son. The Quicks still live there, lovingly tending the only one of the "army colony" restored homes surviving as a residence. It is a magnificent place, its back lawn rolling down to Brushy Creek.

Bill Todd's mother lived at the restored "Mexican schoolhouse" until she died. Then Todd sold the site to the Comfort Inn motel chain. "I am an evil man," he said. "I let them demolish that thing. You couldn't move it. It was a beautiful house; it was just in the wrong place."⁶⁷² In the motel's back parking lot just south of Texas Ranch to Market Road 620, one

⁶⁷¹Paul L. Daley, "Round Rock's St. Charles Inn Brings Back Stagecoach Days," *Austin American Statesman*, July 26, 1970. Rutland went into an unusual form of real estate, buying dilapidated buildings, restoring and reselling them. Among her projects were Old Town's St. Charles Inn, Rose House, and the old post office.

⁶⁷²Todd, *ibid.*

still catches a whiff of what Colonel Todd and I-35 builder Travis Long must have seen as they faced west, sipping drinks late in the day on College Hill — dry wall stone terraces, an ancient oak tree (now dying), a pungent bed of iris, a fragment of flagstone patio. On the other side of the Comfort Inn, one can stand and observe the intersection of Interstate 35 and Ranch to Market 620, where one hundred and fifty thousand vehicles pass by every day.

Golden Interchange

All across America, the 1956 creation of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways opened a Pandora's box of possibilities for cities, property owners and entrepreneurs. As details of the new highway system percolated from the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads to state highway departments to city officials' offices and chambers of commerce, the gas station, motel and cafe owners whose enterprises depended on passing traffic started writing letters to anyone they thought was in the know. Most expressed concern — deathly concern — about the

proposed interstates' precise routes. Could the mom-and-pop operations continue harvesting greenbacks from passing travelers with the new interstate system? If not, they wanted it changed.⁶⁷³

In Texas, highway engineers had pondered interstate routes since the mid-1940's. Originally, the U.S. 81 "superhighway" route through Austin — now Interstate 35 — would have cut through the heart of the University of Texas campus, but that idea was abandoned.⁶⁷⁴ In Williamson County, as we have seen, the engineers first thought the interstate might go just west of Taylor. But by late 1956, the "U.S. 81 Superhighway" route — Interregional Highway 35 — was firm. In Williamson County, it would follow U.S. Highway 81 except at Georgetown, where it looped about a mile west of the Courthouse, and at Round Rock, where it veered west of 81 by six blocks, cutting through Old Round Rock.⁶⁷⁵

Highway 81 was Georgetown's and Round Rock's lifeline to outside money. It wasn't much, but it was about all either town

⁶⁷³Senator Lyndon B. Johnson received heart-rending letters from his Texas constituents, mostly small business owners who feared the new interstate routes would ruin businesses that had taken them a lifetime to build. One involved a West Texas motel owner who had scrimped and saved to purchase and upgrade a motel which the proposed interstate would miss by a mile. See 1958-1960 Senate Case & Project Files, Boxes 603, 677, 774, LBJ Library, Austin

⁶⁷⁴Kelly Daniel, "Vintage plan shows what I-35 might have been," *Austin American-Statesman*, Nov. 28, 1999, B-1

⁶⁷⁵Right of way costs may have been one factor in keeping "loops" to a minimum in Williamson County. Once Texas counties were absolved from acquiring interstate right of way, it became more economical for state engineers to mimic established routes of U.S. highways, where right of way already existed, than to march across unscathed territory.

had.⁶⁷⁶ Unlike Taylor, Georgetown and Round Rock had no fabulous Black Waxy Prairie sustaining thousands of farm families, no big industry, no interstate rail intersection, no nearby oil fields. Good farm land existed east of Georgetown and Round Rock, but it did not compare to the Black Waxy, which kept a thickly populated agricultural population in business. West of the Balcones Escarpment towns, a few score ranching families wrestled with the prospect of default during the seven-year drought of the Fifties. In Georgetown and Round Rock, highway money was important. Filling stations studded Highway 81 through both cities; each had eateries and drive-ins geared toward passing traffic: Round Rock touted Robertson's Steak House and the Clay Pot, while Georgetown's L&M and King Cole Cafe pulled drivers off the road. A Georgetown man recalls "crickets piling up so high in front of the L&M and King Cole Cafe they had to get dump trucks to haul them away. The cafes were open all night and their lights drew those crickets, as well as travelers. Highway 81 was the backbone of the United States."⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁶According to the Texas Highway Department, Georgetown had 4,951 residents in 1950; Round Rock had 1,438.

⁶⁷⁷Interview: Paul Hindelang, July 2, 1998, Georgetown

Many feared the loss of Highway 81 traffic to the new interstate would kill their towns. In Round Rock, as we have seen, the highway department scotched a proposal to ram I-35 right through the heart of the little village. In Georgetown,

when the local folks first heard that the interstate was going to loop around Georgetown, they became frantic There was a strong contingent that thought [the interstate] should go on both sides of the Courthouse — Main Street for north-bound traffic and Austin Avenue for cars heading south. Of course, nobody in Georgetown had *seen* an interstate. It was a foreign concept to everybody. Their real concern was that the world was going to pass them by.⁶⁷⁸

Williamson County ranchers and farmers grimly joked about the Federal farm policy, which paid cattlemen to slaughter herds and farmers to refrain from planting crops.⁶⁷⁹ They told macabre jokes about the coming interstate, which was viewed with distaste. When Georgetown's Sam Brady told friends he had bought property on Highway 81 for a new insurance office just north of the Courthouse Square, they advised against the plan.⁶⁸⁰ "You don't want to go moving down there," hooted "Jelly" Caskey. "When the interstate comes in, we're going to have to plow up Austin Avenue and put it in the Soil Bank!"⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁸Interview: Bill Snead, July 2, 1998, Georgetown

⁶⁷⁹In Central Texas, farmers and ranchers not only had to contend with the worst drought in memory but also foot-and-mouth disease which had infected Texas cattle. Many herds had to be destroyed.

⁶⁸⁰In Georgetown, U.S. Highway 81 is named Austin Avenue.

⁶⁸¹Interview: Sam Brady, July 7, 1998, Georgetown

On October 1, 1959, the Bureau of Public Roads declared the Interstate 35 route through Texas official.⁶⁸² One essential element of the plan, however, remained somewhat fluid: its interchanges and ramp exits. If I-35 was replacing the “backbone of Texas,” as Paul Hindelang called Highway 81, the new superhighway’s interchanges — where drivers would enter, exit and cross over — were like a backbone’s vertebrae. If the vertebrae squeezed together too tightly, the spine might fuse, clogging traffic and defeating the chief purpose of the interstate — moving cars quickly and safely. But if the vertebrae lay too far apart, the backbone might become an impregnable barrier. The interstate could form an impermeable wall through rural areas, cutting farms, ranches and towns into unusable bits and blocking economic development. The negative impact of this interstate “wall” was somewhat mitigated by DeWitt Greer’s devotion to access, or frontage, roads paralleling Texas’ interstates — a quirk shared by few states in the Union — but still, in a largely rural state, the interstate system was seen as an out-scaled intrusion on agricultural areas.⁶⁸³

If one ponders a 1959 Williamson County map, it becomes obvious that highway planners were planning interchanges and ramps to serve existing communities, but without any thought

⁶⁸²Interview: Morton Broad, March 23, 2000, Austin

⁶⁸³Don Fairchild, “IH 35: Man’s Effort to Join Nation by a Highway,” *Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 10, 1971; Kelly Daniel, “Frontage roads to become Texas highway relics,” Aug. 2, 2001, *Austin Statesman*, A-1

about growth the interstate and its exchanges might trigger. They were strictly limited to allow for speedy traffic and discourage accidents. Because of their scarcity, interchanges meant potential money in the bank. In 1959, the planned interchanges were marked on the designated I-35 route.⁶⁸⁴ But that didn't stop people from trying to alter them. Sometimes, armed with sufficient political pull and a compelling argument, they succeeded.

One of the first petitioners to write Senator Johnson about interstate exchanges was Dion VanBibber, the fabled Salado restaurateur who had turned a historic log cabin into a dining legend. His place, the Old Stage Coach Inn, had been written up in *Life* and *Gourmet* magazines.⁶⁸⁵ In the Fifties, it was the only culinary bright spot (above the diner level) between Dallas and

⁶⁸⁴The original I-35 exits in Williamson County included, running north to south, one north of Jarrell, one south of Jarrell, exits leading to Theon, Walburg, Florence, and Andice (in north Georgetown), two in Georgetown (at Highway 29 and Leander Road), one south of Georgetown at the junction of Owen Sherrill's land and Texas Crushed Stone property, one north of Round Rock, one at Highway 79, and one at FM 1325. See "Land Purchase Will Begin For Interregional Hwy 25," Williamson County *Sun*, Sept. 14, 1961.

⁶⁸⁵Letter: Mrs. Claud C. Westerfeld to Senator Lyndon Johnson, May 3, 1958; VanBibber to Johnson, March 26, 1958, Senate Case and Project Files 1958, Container 603, LBJ Library. Westerfeld alluded to the restaurant's national reputation. I remember seeing the framed articles hanging in the entry way.

Green Pastures in Austin. The Inn sat a few feet from U.S. Highway 81. Except for the highway, Salado appeared frozen in the nineteenth century, when stagecoach drivers had changed horse teams there. Williamson County's gentry loved driving up to Stage Coach Inn, a few miles north of the county line, to dine on shrimp cocktail, tomato aspic, prime ribs of beef, corn fritters and "Strawberry Kisses" under the great oak trees of VanBibber's romantic patio.

Like most highway restaurant owners in the United States, VanBibber was deeply worried about the interstate. "The superhighway is truly a wonderful institution," he wrote. "Also, on occasion, it can be very ruthless."⁶⁸⁶ At Salado, it had been determined, there would be no exit from which motorists could easily reach the Old Stage Coach Inn from Interstate 35. VanBibber had corresponded with the engineer in charge of I-35 through Bell County before writing Senator Johnson, concluding that his case was "hopeless."⁶⁸⁷ Still, he appealed to the Texas Senator. Originally, the Texas Highway Department had recommended an exit ramp at Salado that would have served Old Stagecoach Inn nicely, but the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads had deleted it from the plans. It had been a policy decision. The Bureau took the position that no access ramps or connections should "serve any privately owned installation" because "this

⁶⁸⁶Letter: Dion VanBibber to Thomas C. Collier, March 12, 1958, *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁷*Ibid.*

would encourage other businesses similarly situated to request ramps and connections.”⁶⁸⁸ Time was now of the essence; I-35 was about to open through Salado. VanBibber laid out the situation for Senator Johnson, adding a personal note:

You probably do not remember me but I am sure you remember my establishment, the old Stage Coach Inn at Salado. For, I recall that you had lunch there with friends not long after your illness. I do hope that you remember it favorably for it is in serious trouble and needs the help of all Texans who love their state Be sure that this is not a whim nor the wail of one who sees a hundred thousand dollar investment going down the drain but also the urgent cry for help from an old historic place that hopes to carry on for many years to come⁶⁸⁹

A few weeks later, Interstate 35 opened through Bell County. “Here was an immediate and first-hand opportunity to study the results,” the restaurateur wrote Johnson in a follow-up letter.

Immediately this traffic was diverted, north-bound patrons of the Inn were reduced to a mere trickle of bewildered, unhappy and often indignant guests who were obliged to pass the entrance and detour back. This condition prevailed until some more forthright travellers decided to leave the Expressway and cross to the access road, via the ditch, at the point where I have requested that a ramp be constructed. Business returned to almost normal. However, on this rainy week end when such a crossing was

⁶⁸⁸Letters: Collier to VanBibber, March 5, 1958; F.C. Turner to Johnson, May 21, 1958, *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁹Letter: VanBibber to Johnson, March 26, 1958, *ibid.*

impossible, business was again reduced to fifty per cent of normal. It would certainly seem that this is *prima facie* evidence that such a ramp is desirable and necessary.⁶⁹⁰

The day he received this epistle, Johnson whipped off a message to the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads. We do not know what he said, because the letter is missing from his files.⁶⁹¹ But the Bureau replied with good news. The Texas Highway Department had targeted “development of the interstate highway” in the Salado area with Federal-Aid Highway Act funds it had received.⁶⁹² Salado would get its “additional point of access.” The Old Stage Coach Inn was saved.⁶⁹³

Eight miles south of Old Stage Coach Inn, just south of the Williamson County line, Georgetown’s Charles A. Forbes, Humble Oil Company’s Williamson County distributor, borrowed money, purchased land and built a truck stop where he reckoned an exit would dump traffic off Interstate 35. A friend at the Texas

⁶⁹⁰Letter: VanBibber to Johnson, April 14, 1958, *ibid.*

⁶⁹¹The letter must have been written because it was referred to twice in subsequent correspondence, including a letter from F.C. Turner, Deputy Commissioner of the Bureau of Public Roads, to Johnson dated April 24, 1958, in which Turner refers to Johnson’s April 15 letter. *Ibid.*

⁶⁹²Letter: Turner to Johnson, *ibid.*

⁶⁹³Letter: Johnson to VanBibber, May 22, 1958, *ibid.*

Highway Department had told him an exit would probably be built there, but warned that the Bureau of Public Roads in Washington had the last word. Forbes' widow, Mary Forbes, recalled her husband's hopes. "When Charles bought that property, he was so excited," she remembered. "He said, 'If this works out the way I think it's going to work out, this will be both boys' college educations.' But it didn't work out."⁶⁹⁴

Forbes cut an elegant swath. Quick on his feet, comfortable with national politicians as well as the farmers and ranchers he traded with, he recently had served as Georgetown's mayor. But in 1964, his dreams were turning sour. Five times, Texas Highway Department had asked the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads for an exit at an approved grade separation (overpass) over I-35 so two county roads would not be blocked. Five times the Bureau had refused the requests. Forbes had bet on this exit. In June 1963, Forbes had written Congressman Homer Thornberry for assistance. Thornberry queried the Bureau and learned that the exit Forbes sought had been partly constructed when Jarrell citizens stopped it with a protest. The Bureau's top man informed Thornberry:

The State . . . upon being prompted by protests by the citizens of Jarrell, proposed that the exit ramp in the vicinity of Station 70 be eliminated and relocated to the south at a point near the Jarrell interchange structure. This proposal was approved . . . because it would provide more

⁶⁹⁴Interview: Mary Forbes, March 26, 2000, Georgetown

direct service to the community of Jarrell The addition now of the ramp requested by Mr. Forbes to provide access to his business establishment would result in a duplication of southbound exit ramps serving the Jarrell interchange.⁶⁹⁵

On January 14, 1964, the new interstate opened in Williamson County's northern third, and the C.A. Forbes Truck Stop and Cafe started hemorrhaging money. Before I-35 opened, from January 1 through January 14, Forbes had delivered 17,339 gallons of Humble gasoline to his truck stop. After the interstate opened, from January 15 through January 30, he delivered 1,183 gallons — a ninety-three percent decrease. In the two weeks after the new highway opened, the cafe's business fell eighty percent.⁶⁹⁶ Forbes was desperate. State Representative Gene Fondren of Taylor arranged a Texas Highway Commission hearing, at which state engineers agreed to try again.⁶⁹⁷ They did, but for the sixth time, Washington rejected the request for an exit ramp at Forbes' truck stop. The Bureau's chief wrote Pickle, “. . . unless a policy is followed consistently, there results similar requests from other property owners which in fairness cannot be denied.”⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵Letter: Rex M. Whitton to Thornberry, July 1, 1963, Box 17, Pickle Papers, Center for American History

⁶⁹⁶Letter, Charles A. Forbes to J.J. “Jake” Pickle, Feb. 4, 1964, *ibid.* Forbes sent copies of the letter to Senators Ralph Yarborough and John Tower of Texas, both of whom contacted the Bureau of Public Roads on his behalf. Also see “Fondren Asks Highway Assistance for Jarrell,” Taylor *Daily Press*, Feb. 6, 1964, 2

⁶⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁸Letter: Whitton to Pickle, March 31, 1964, *ibid.*

Forbes was bitterly disappointed. He felt that his government was killing “the American way of life.”⁶⁹⁹ He accepted “absolute failure” of his effort to convince the Bureau of Public Roads to allow the exit. “They hold the whip handle and are certainly using it,” he wrote Pickle. “Everyone in Texas approved our request.” At this point, Forbes was seeking a loan from the Small Business Administration to “pay off the commercial bank for the debt for this property I am attempting to avoid a very embarrassing situation and prevent a default, which I have no intention of committing.” He likened his plight to “paying the funeral director on the installment plan.”⁷⁰⁰

Pickle kept probing at interstices in the Bureau’s policy.⁷⁰¹ On May 14, he received a missive from Rex Whitton, the top man at the Bureau, denying the latest request for the exit Forbes sought. The bottom line, Whitton wrote, was that accepting this proposal would constitute “undue preferential treatment to some”⁷⁰² But that same morning, Pickle had coffee with one of Whitton’s bureaucrats, Walt Osborne, Chief of Special Procedures Branch, Project Coordination Division. After his meeting with Osborne, Pickle wrote Forbes “. . . there is a possibility of some relief.” Osborne had indicated, Pickle wrote, “the Federal boys here would not object if the State would agree to an off-ramp,

⁶⁹⁹Letter: Forbes to Thornberry, *ibid.*

⁷⁰⁰Letter: Forbes to Pickle, April 14, 1964, *ibid.*

⁷⁰¹Letter: Pickle to Forbes, April 21, 1964, *ibid.*

⁷⁰²Letter: Whitton to Pickle, May 14, 1964, *ibid.*

which I believe would be fairly near your station You understand that you will have to sell this to the State officials, but I do not anticipate that you will have a great deal of trouble”⁷⁰³ Pickle must have enjoyed dictating a short note that afternoon. “Dear Mr. Whitton,” it read,

Thank you for your letter of May 14 regarding additional ramp connections with Interstate Route 35 north of Jarrell. Mr. Osborne came by the office today for a personal visit about this matter, which I appreciate very much.⁷⁰⁴

The exit was built.⁷⁰⁵ Unfortunately, it was too late to save Forbes’ truck stop. “That was Charles’ biggest producer, and he lost it all. It was a disaster for him. By the time we got the deal done his business was gone,” Fondren recalls.⁷⁰⁶ Forbes sold the property and it became a trailer park. Thirty-five years later, it still is a ramshackle collection of trailers. Men in tee-shirts lounge about, drinking beer on a Sunday afternoon, flicking spent cigarettes into tangled heaps of trash. It is a portrait of rural highway poverty, a photo opportunity for a born-again Walker Evans.

The only remnant of Charles Forbes’s fight for his business is a sign on Interstate 35’s southbound track. “The boys at the Texas Highway Department were so irritated at the Yankees up in

⁷⁰³Letter: Pickle to Forbes, May 14, 1964, *ibid.*

⁷⁰⁴Letter: Pickle to Whitton, May 15, 1964, *ibid.*

⁷⁰⁵The U.S. Bureau of Public Roads approved the exit on June 5, 1964. See Pickle Papers, Box 17, June 5, 1964 memo to jp.

⁷⁰⁶Interview, Gene Fondren, Sept. 1, 2000, Austin

Washington who had been so difficult that they named it ‘Yankee Exit,’ ” Mary Forbes said with a tight smile.⁷⁰⁷

Moses J. Kouri and his younger brother Tom traded in Austin real estate. At one time, they owned one hundred and fifty rent houses. They bought, improved and sold. Sometimes they just bought and sold. They had prospered after moving to Austin from Manor when they were boys. Their father, James “Jim” Kouri, and his three brothers had immigrated to Texas from Lebanon in the late 1880’s. “They had a hard fight,” said Tom Kouri. “They couldn’t speak English, and they became peddlers. They carried piece goods in backpacks all over Texas. They were ambushed in West Texas, but they liked Central Texas. The Germans and Swedes were all so nice.”⁷⁰⁸ The Kouri brothers settled in Manor, where Jim acquired several farms and a big mercantile store.

In the Twenties, Jim Kouri started buying property in Austin, the first pieces on Sixth and Guadalupe streets. He

⁷⁰⁷Mary Forbes, *ibid.*

⁷⁰⁸Interview: Tom Kouri, Sept. 22, 2000, Austin. I am indebted to Mr. Kouri for supplying generous details of his family’s background, of his and Moses Kouri’s purchases along U.S. Highway 81, later Interstate 35, and their efforts to influence highway builders to create an interchange and a new highway from scratch.

dispatched Moses, then barely seventeen, to Austin to oversee renovation of an old rooming house. Moses invited his eight-year-old brother, Tom, to live with him in Austin and “learn the business.” Tom learned about construction — and life — from Moses, whom he worshipped.⁷⁰⁹ Moses was a “brilliant, brilliant man,” his brother said, the “genius of the family.” Moses could foresee the future. “He gambled mainly on real estate. He saw what was coming and he dealt with it,” Tom said. “If Moses had been living today, I think Michael Dell would have had to take a back seat to him.”

Each fall, Tom and Moses drove up U.S. Highway 81 to Dallas for the University of Texas’s annual grudge match against Oklahoma University. “Every year, we would drive by this ranch in Williamson County, and Moses would look at it and say, ‘I *need* to own that land.’ He talked to Owen Sherrill in Georgetown — Sherrill was the ranch king of Williamson County — and one day Sherrill called to say the ranch owner’s widow wanted to sell.” The ranch sat west of the highway halfway between Round Rock and Georgetown. On a cold misty Sunday afternoon in April 1962, the Kouri brothers drove up to Williamson County, dickered with Opal Overby, and bought one thousand and twenty acres.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁹Interview: Bob Bennett, Sept. 14, 2000, Round Rock. Bennett has been Round Rock’s city manager for nearly a quarter of a century.

⁷¹⁰Kouri, *ibid.*; Warranty Deed Vol. 450, p. 683, April 7, 1963, Williamson County Deed Records, Georgetown. The Kouris added another forty acres to the spread in a separate purchase.

Moses Kouri had always believed Highway 81 would become Texas' chief north-south artery — not Highway 281, as some thought, or the more easterly route via Taylor. Already Highway 81 was the main road from Mexico to Dallas. Now the interstate was being built, moving steadily toward Williamson County. If the Kouris could somehow cause a full interchange to be built at their property, its value would multiply many times. The physical setup at their ranch mirrored what Charles Forbes faced in north Williamson County, though at first glance their situation seemed less promising. A dirt county road heading east would terminate at the interstate highway. There was no road going west from I-35 near the Kouri property. There was no reason for one: hardly anyone lived west of the escarpment. Three hundred lived in Leander; Cedar Park's post office served about fifty. An overpass would join the existing county road to I-35 across from the Kouri place, but that was all.

The Kouri men went to work. Within seven months of buying the Overby ranch, they had hired attorney Gene Fondren, who was also Williamson County's state representative, to represent their interest in creating a full interchange where their property touched I-35.⁷¹¹ The Kouris teamed up with John H. Nash Jr., who owned about fifteen hundred acres across Highway 81 from their place and another sixteen hundred acres north of

⁷¹¹Fondren, *ibid.*

them.⁷¹² Nash, who also hired an attorney, owned Austin's Capitol Chevrolet car dealership and a name that commanded respect, particularly among politicians and the road lobby.⁷¹³

Williamson County Judge Stone wrote Ed Bluestein, the highway department's district engineer in charge of the interstate, spelling out the county's interest in developing an interchange halfway between Georgetown and Round Rock. "As county officials," Stone wrote,

we try to anticipate future county road system requirements to meet the needs and demands of our developing communities There are presently no east-west roads crossing the area west of the proposed U.S. Interregional 35 between the Brushy Creek Road near Round Rock and RM 2243 near Georgetown.⁷¹⁴ Although this area in the past has been owned by a few rather large landowners, current trends give every indication that we

⁷¹²Map: South Half of Williamson County, 1969, Tobin Surveys Inc., San Antonio, Texas. John H. Nash Jr. hired Robert Sneed of Sneed & Vine, Austin, to represent him with the Texas Highway Department and U.S. Bureau of Public Roads.

⁷¹³"John H. Nash Jr. dies in Hong Kong," Austin *American-Statesman*, Oct. 1, 1979. Nash sat on the board of the Lower Colorado River Authority and was well known in Washington.

⁷¹⁴Ranch to Market 2243 was locally known as Leander Road; the Brushy Creek Road was called Harry Mann Road, the latter name interpreted by generations of Williamson County teenagers as "Hairy Man Road." Brushy Creek Road was one of several early cattle trails called the Chisholm Trail.



Figures 46-48: Tom and Moses Kouri, left, attend a Houston Livestock Show in 1962. Bottom, Tom's wife, Helen, and their daughter Pamela stand in front of the old Overby ranch on Highway 81 halfway between Georgetown and Round Rock. Below, Charles Forbes.



can expect rather rapid development with many additional people and residences in the foreseeable future.⁷¹⁵

It may have been the “most feasible” route, as Stone suggested, though the judge envisioned curving the road southwesterly (rather than straight west) to connect with Brushy Creek Road west of Round Rock. The Round Rock Independent School District threw its weight behind the interchange proposal, dittoing Stone’s arguments.⁷¹⁶ Fondren lobbied Bluestein for the Texas Highway Department’s blessings.⁷¹⁷ His central argument was that by 1975, Round Rock and Georgetown would become part of Austin, with “almost continuous development along Interstate 35.”⁷¹⁸ It was a planner’s argument, one highway builders would appreciate. The argument centered on the long-range “public good” derived from adding the interchange. The fact that Kouri and Nash property would escalate in value was not mentioned.

Convincing the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads was no snap. In the winter of 1964, while Charles Forbes was watching his truck stop business die, Fondren shuttled to Washington seven or eight times, arguing the Kouris’ case. “There was no exit ramp anywhere between Georgetown and Round Rock,” Fondren

⁷¹⁵Letter: Stone to Ed Bluestein, Nov. 11, 1963, Pickle Papers, *ibid.*

⁷¹⁶Letter: Noel Grisham to Bluestein, Nov. 12, 1963, *ibid.* Grisham was superintendent of the Round Rock Independent School District.

⁷¹⁷He was joined by Austin attorney Robert Sneed, hired by John Nash.

⁷¹⁸Letter: Gene Fondren and Robert Sneed to Bluestein, Dec. 3, 1963, *ibid.*

recently recalled.⁷¹⁹ “We argued that 1431 would become a major highway, and eventually it did. It’s *the* east-west connection in Williamson County.”⁷²⁰ The chief engineer at the Bureau of Roads was a Texas Highway Department alumnus; “He was our highway connection,” said Fondren. “Jake, of course, was my entrée. And then, of course, we had LBJ in the background. That didn’t hurt.” It also didn’t hurt that, as he put it, “the Kouris spent some serious money.”

Back in Williamson County, “people thought we were crazy,” Tom Kouri remembered forty years later. “They thought we were spending way too much money. But Moses had it figured out.” On June 5, 1964, Jake Pickle got a call from Walt Osborne at the Bureau of Public roads. The Kouris and Nash would get a full interchange across their property between Georgetown and Round Rock.⁷²¹ Anticipating success, Tom and Moses Kouri had already flipped the property to Houston car dealer Raymond Pearson. “We made a very handsome profit,” said Kouri. “A very, very, very handsome profit.”⁷²²

⁷¹⁹Actually, the original plan provided for an exit at Texas Crushed Stone, just below Georgetown, and one just north of Round Rock, where I-35 split off from Mays Street.

⁷²⁰Fondren was referring to Texas Ranch to Market 1431, which in Williamson County did not exist until 1986, when it connected Interstate 35 and U.S. Highway 183 at Cedar Park.

⁷²¹Memo: jp, June 5, 1964, Pickle Papers, *ibid.* The memo included the information that two exit ramps north of Jarrell had also received approval, including the one leading to Forbes Truck Stop.

⁷²²Kouri, *ibid.*; Williamson County Deed Records, Vol. 468, p.654, General Warranty Deed, May 27, 1964, Georgetown

That summer, the Kouri brothers sunk that profit into another piece of Williamson County, purchasing a dairy farm at the northwestern intersection of Interstate 35 and Texas Farm to Market 1325, then a deserted country road south of Round Rock. “It was so simple,” Tom remembered.

Moses went out there and he would drive by there and look at it. He called his realtor. “See if you can buy that farm,” he said. Mr. Ernest Anderson said he was willing to sell 121 acres, but he said, ‘I want to keep the house.’ Then he quoted a ridiculous price. Moses agreed to the price but he wanted the acreage *and* the house, regardless of the price. He told me, “See what he wants — I *need* that. We’ve got to have it.” I say, Mose, that’s a little high! It’s a ridiculous price!” He says, “We got the money, we’re going to buy it!”

So, shortly after selling the Overby ranch, Moses and Tom Kouri bought 121 acres at the FM 1325 intersection with I-35, just north of the Travis County line. In 1998, Tom sold it.⁷²³ By that time, Dell Computer sprawled east of I-35 on Louis Henna Boulevard and State Farm Insurance’s headquarters faced Kouri’s land across FM 1325. The Kouri farm was an undeveloped island in a sea of commercial and retail property. “In 1977 I retired from the grocery business and started ranching,” Tom said. “I went out there every day. I got an old tractor. I horned those

⁷²³Moses Kouri died in January 1974.

cattle, mowed that hay. All the kids and grandkids had a great time. I miss it even today.”⁷²⁴

Others profited from Moses Kouri’s instinct about the Overby ranch. Less than a year after the Kouris sold the Overby place, Pearson resold it to the Lamoc Corporation. Six years later, the Westinghouse Corporation bought the land, at least partly because it commanded an interchange.⁷²⁵ Westinghouse was the first national corporation to move to Williamson County. In 1986, twenty-three years after Judge Stone predicted it, a new five-lane highway, Ranch to Market 1431, carved open the untouched heart of Williamson County ranch land. The speck of humanity that had been Cedar Park stood ready to capture the next new wave of development off I-35.

In May 1963, Texas Highway Department engineers were hunting for solid rock into which to drive pilings for an overpass

⁷²⁴Kouri, *ibid.* Tom Kouri owned the Handy-Andy grocery franchise in Austin, which became the Humpty Dumpty grocery chain.

⁷²⁵Interview: Claude Hays, Aug. 20, 2001, Georgetown. Mr. Hays is senior partner of Georgetown Title Company, which provided invaluable research assistance on the history of the Kouri land purchase, as well as histories of land deals near Lake Georgetown and Granger Lake, including Ralph Moore’s. See Williamson County Deed Records, Vol. 475, p. 163 for Pearson’s sale to Lamoc Corporation (Walter S. Higgins acting for Pearson); and Vol. 479, p.13 for details of Lamoc’s July 13, 1971 sale to Westinghouse Corporation.

that would allow Interstate 35 to soar over the Georgetown Railroad tracks a mile south of Georgetown. This is not an easy task anywhere along the cave-riddled Balcones Escarpment. It was especially difficult on this portion of the Edwards Aquifer Formation, where the soil is nearly as permeable as a kitchen sieve. Still, the engineers were astonished as they drilled hole after hole — nineteen in all — and broke through into thin air eleven times.

They decided to investigate. They dropped a highway construction worker into a core hole to explore. The man, whose name is lost to history, rode a drill bit down through forty feet of solid rock, armed with a flashlight, until he landed on a wet cave floor. Water dripping from the ceiling and tons of bat guano made the floor slippery, and the underground explorer tripped and dropped his flashlight in the muck. In total darkness, except for a pinpoint of light from the core hole above, he scrabbled about, his panic growing, until he found his flashlight.

He had landed in what is now known as Inner Space Caverns' "Discovery Room," a theatrically huge space laced with frozen fountains forty thousand years old, waves of limestone "curtains" dripping from the ceiling, and stalagmite totems thrusting up from still "rim pools" and a thick mud floor. Interstate 35 had revealed one of Texas's most exquisite

caverns.⁷²⁶ From the point of view of spelunkers and academic geologists and paleontologists, it was a riveting find.⁷²⁷ From the Texas Highway Department's perspective, it was a nuisance.

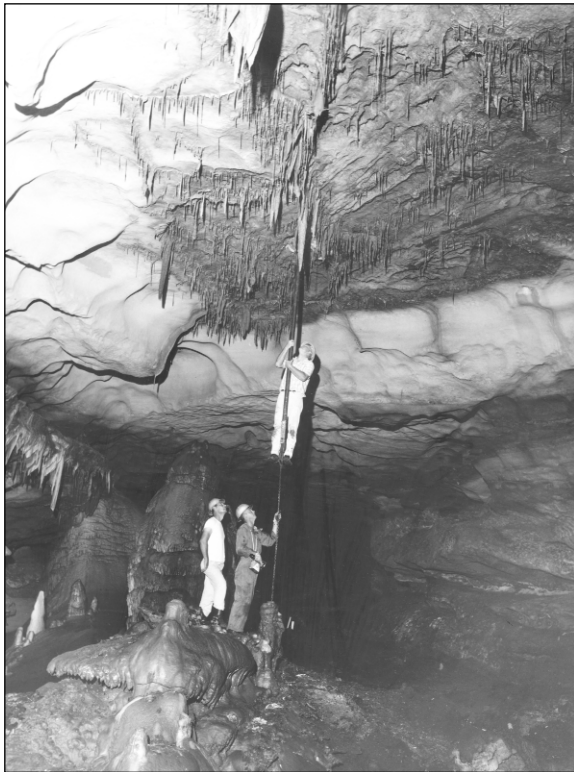
The road engineers wanted to seal the cavern entrance, which lay right under the planned expressway. Probably they would have done so if news of the caverns could have been kept quiet. But word leaked out. University of Texas student Bill Russell of Georgetown led the University of Texas Speleological Society to the cavern and the cave buffs started mapping.⁷²⁸ The superhighway project ground to a halt.

In December, six months after I-35's core-sampling crew first discovered the caverns, the Georgetown newspaper learned about the cave when Dallas columnist Frank Tolbert called to inquire about it. "Big Cave Discovered South of Town, Parts of

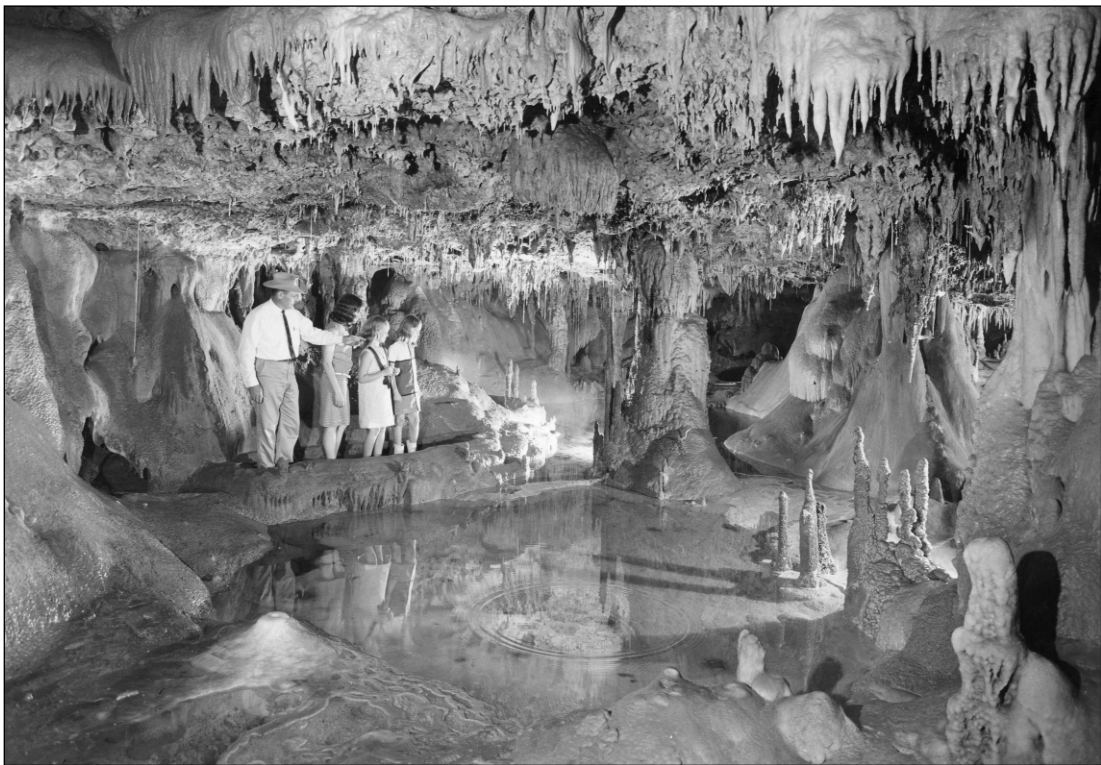
⁷²⁶For this account I have relied heavily on a published account by Tommie Pinkard, "Under the Interstate," *Texas Highways*, May 1966, 15; and on interviews with George Norsworthy Jr., president of Inner Space, July 14, 1998; Doyle Clawson, July 14, 1998; and Ramsey Clinton, July 1, 1998. The Georgetown Corporation was created to develop the caves into a commercial attraction. Partners were Donald Duncan, Burnet rancher and banker; Burnet Mayor Ramsey Clinton, cave manager Doyle Clawson, and Dallas advertising men George and Tom Norsworthy, who had owned Longhorn Caverns since 1932. Also see "Inner Space Cavern," *Handbook of Texas*, Vol. III (1976), Eldon Stephen Branda, ed., Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 430.

⁷²⁷Adventurous Georgetown teenagers had explored the caves on Dr. W.W. Laubach's place for years. They called it Bat Cave.

⁷²⁸They mapped seven thousand feet of caves and tunnels, which wound under the interstate like a sensuous dragon. Eventually four miles of cavern were explored. See *Texas Highways*, *ibid.*, and "Roadside Attractions Steer New Course," *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 1998.



Figures 49, 50: A state highway worker rides a core drill, left, into an unknown cave under Interstate 35 near Georgetown. Below, Inner Space's first visitors gaze in awe at the fabulous formations.



Camel & Elephant are Found,” a *Sun* headline trumpeted.⁷²⁹ Dr. William W. Laubach, a retired Lutheran minister who owned the property, had invited Southern Methodist University scientists to tour the caverns, and their excitement had found its way into the Dallas dailies. The professors found fossilized bones not only of an extinct form of camel and elephant (actually a mammoth), but also of peccary, jaguar, dire wolf, and a small horse — all extinct.⁷³⁰

Meanwhile, highway department officials champed at the bit to seal “Laubach Cavern” and move on.⁷³¹ Greer and Bluestein agreed to close the cavern’s entrance on February 10, 1964, so they could complete the unfinished I-35 bridge over Georgetown Railroad’s tracks, but Georgetown Mayor Thatcher Atkin and Chamber of Commerce President Robert F.B. “Skip” Morse pleaded for a few days’ delay, smelling the prospect of a deal that could result in development of the caves as a commercial attraction. Atkin called his brother-in-law, Congressman Pickle, for help. State Representative Fondren, working furiously to save Charles Forbes’ truck stop and to create an interchange on the Nash and Kouri land, tackled this problem as well.

Somehow the state was held off long enough to work out the conflicting interests of Laubach, the caverns’ prospective

⁷²⁹“Big Cave Discovered”; Don Scarbrough, “Passing Glance,” Williamson County *Sun*, Dec. 19, 1963, 1

⁷³⁰Bob H. Slaughter, “Downward, Ho! Georgetown Cave Hailed by ‘Dallas Times Herald,’” Williamson County *Sun*, Feb. 27, 1964

⁷³¹Memo: Bob to Jake Pickle, Feb. 7, 1964, Box 17, Pickle Papers

operators, and the State Highway Department, which ended up redesigning an access road so that Inner Space visitors could easily enter the tourist attraction. The cavern's progress from raw cave to commercial enterprise was managed by Doyle Clawson, who had run Burnet's Longhorn Caverns for years.

"We weren't the only ones interested in it," he said.

If nobody had wanted to develop it, the highway department would have sealed it. To them it was just trouble . . . [But] in my years managing Longhorn Caverns, I had gotten to be friends with lots of spelunkers from the University of Texas Speleological Society . . . my friends came running to me and told me about these beautiful caverns. What sealed the deal for us was the fact that Dr. Laubach's son was college roommates with a young man named Michael Lorfin, who worked as a guide at Longhorn Caverns. That was the key to the whole deal.⁷³²

The cave's location was its key to success. "We were so excited to have that location right there on the interstate," said Ramsey Clinton, a partner in the enterprise.⁷³³ Other partners were Tom and George Norsworthy, who owned a Dallas advertising agency and Longhorn Caverns. They were close friends with the developers of Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington. As a result, the cavern's promoters seriously considered turning

⁷³²Interview: Doyle Clawson, July 14, 1998, Georgetown

⁷³³Interview: Ramsey Clinton, July 1, 1998, Georgetown

their geological curiosity into a theme park, along the lines of Six Flags.

“Partly we didn’t do this because it seemed to run counter to the feeling of the natural caverns,” said George Norsworthy Jr. many years later. “And partly it was a lack of sewer and water service. We couldn’t do a big restaurant without access to sewer and water.”⁷³⁴

Georgetown never ran a water or sewer line down the western face of Interstate 35, and no restaurant ever opened. But the caverns still made a big splash. The Georgetown Corporation partnership invested one hundred and seventy five thousand dollars in developing them commercially, hiring a French lighting firm to illuminate the “Lake of the Moon” room. After a name-the-cavern contest failed to produce the perfect name, the owners themselves came up with “Inner Space” — a subliminal play on Americans’ fascination with the outer space program in the mid-1960’s.

Inner Space opened July 22, 1966. A brief trolley ride took the first visitors into the bowels of a two-mile trace of caverns winding under Interstate 35.⁷³⁵ In a room as big as a football field, they gazed at the fossilized bones of elephant-sized giant

⁷³⁴Telephone interview: George Norsworthy, Jr., July 14, 1998, Dallas

⁷³⁵Actually, the trolley was not ready on opening day, but it was installed shortly thereafter and has been one of Inner Space’s chief attractions over the years. See “Innerspace Open Friday,” Williamson County *Sun*, July 21, 1966. Eventually, four miles of cavern were explored and mapped, though not all of it was opened to the general public.

sloths, Zimmerman deer (with one hundred and fifty-point antlers), and the armadillo-like *glyptodont*, which looks like a Volkswagen Beetle with a spiked tail. Visitors learned that most of these animals died ten to twenty thousand years ago, presumably after pausing for a drink and plunging through thin soil into the jumble of sink holes that became Inner Space.

Thirty-five years later, Inner Space is a successful corporation. Some three million people have strolled through its corridors, goggling at geological formations that look like frozen waterfalls, Italianate baroque cathedrals, ten-foot-tall ice cream cones, Martha Graham's flowing veil — a steady eighty thousand to a hundred thousand visitors a year.

The tone of the place has shifted from exotic to educational. People don't ramble up and down Interstate 35 as they once did, just for fun, nipping in here for a Stuckey's snack or there to gawk at San Marcos' Snake Farm. Now they hurtle to work and back, or thunder up from Mexico in eighteen-wheeler trucks, with no time to spare. Today, school field trips comprise a big part of Inner Space's business. Kids and their teachers motor from Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth and points between. For an extra fee, children can pretend to work as paleontologists at a mock dig.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁶*Wall Street Journal*, *ibid.*

Unearned Increment?

Most of Williamson County's thirty-five thousand residents viewed the coming of Interstate 35 with distaste. They knew it would be a gigantic project — a sliver of the biggest public works project the United States had ever launched — and they knew it would change things. But they didn't know precisely how. In rural Williamson County, the interregional highway was viewed as a foreign object, an amalgam of designs drawn by engineers and internationalists with questionable intentions. It did not seem calculated to serve local needs, and indeed, it didn't. Public works

water projects appeared potentially useful, but zipping easily from Mexico to Canada seemed an outlandish goal to farmers and ranchers. Williamson County's concerns were local. Its politics were local. Its mix of German, Czech, Mexican, African-American, Swedish, Wend, and Anglo-American communities were exceedingly local, though springing from outlander roots.

The first leg of Interstate 35 opened in north Williamson County on January 15, 1964, a bitterly cold day. It swept past Charles Forbes' instantly isolated truck stop and barreled right through the middle of Jarrell, an unincorporated village of four hundred residents. Formed in 1912 when the Bartlett Western Railroad went through, Jarrell was the county's youngest town.⁷³⁷ When the rail line had failed in 1935, Jarrell ceased having a strong reason for existence. U.S. Highway 81 had helped keep it alive, but the interstate was a different creature. During construction, a Georgetown newspaper editor described the highway's impact on Jarrell in this way:

I drove up to Temple over the weekend and all along the way, where the Interstate Highway isn't a divided lane, work is progressing. You might say that the east end of Jarrell's business district has been wiped clean by the highway department, which is taking the new road directly through

⁷³⁷For a delightful discussion of this little railroad that ran along the northern border of Williamson County from Bartlett to Florence, see Clara Scarbrough's *Land of Good Water*, 334-344. The railroad was known as the "Four Gospels Line."

that community . . . [It was] necessary to destroy or move a number of business firms.⁷³⁸

The new highway eliminated the Jarrell Motor Company, two service stations, a garage, liquor store and cafe. “They done what they were going to do,” said Jarrell’s Emil Danek, owner of Danek Hardware and Lumber, of the highway’s engineers. “They just took out the east side.” The opening of the interstate was nonetheless a memorable day for Danek. “The day they opened it was the day my son was born. It was snowing, and I was driving my wife to the hospital, and I missed the turnoff. I had to back up on the interstate to get off. It was just snowing sheets at the time.”⁷³⁹

The Georgetown segment came next. The county seat’s citizens were scared. “At any rate, we will just have to do the best with what we have left,” wrote a glum *Sun* columnist. “Apparently there is no way out of the predicament It was either run the

⁷³⁸Don Scarbrough, “Passing Glance,” *Williamson County Sun*, Jan. 3, 1963, 1

⁷³⁹Telephone interview: Emil Danek, June 9, 1998, Jarrell



Figure 51: Aerial shot of North Georgetown, looking east over the new bridges in 1965. The old Highway 81 bridge is visible in the distance, and San Gabriel Park is on the left side of the river.

broad double lane through town or west of town.”⁷⁴⁰ Rancher Jay Wolf rode across his land west of Georgetown on horseback one day with a young cowhand named Larry Hausenfluke. “This is where Interstate 35 will come — it will come right through here,” Wolf told Hausenfluke, indicating its path. Hausenfluke was shocked. He mumbled that the people of Georgetown surely wouldn’t want *that*. “It doesn’t matter what they want. It’s what they’ll get,” Wolf snapped.⁷⁴¹ Not long afterwards, the rancher opened a Gulf service station at the intersection of Highway 29 and Interstate 35, the first Georgetown man to take that step. Humble, Texaco, Phillips 66 and Mobil quickly bought sites along the expressway.⁷⁴²

The only person in Georgetown not worried about the coming interstate was land king Sherrill, who understood the connection between new highways, new lakes and the creation of money. He shepherded to fruition Georgetown’s first significant Interstate 35 land sale. Early in 1963, Tom Joseph sold the Weir Estate, consisting of four hundred seventy-five acres and a magnificent Victorian house with a view of the South San Gabriel River, for a quarter of a million dollars. The property would dominate the interchange at Interstate 35 and Leander Road. The

⁷⁴⁰Scarborough, *ibid*.

⁷⁴¹Telephone interview: Larry Hausenfluke, June 5, 1998. For many years, Hausenfluke was superintendent of the Jarrell Independent School District. In 2002, Wolf’s heirs sold his land at I-35 and Highway 29 to a national mall developer.

⁷⁴²“Highway 35 Bypass Opens And All’s Quiet, Very,” *Williamson County Sun*, Sept. 23, 1965

beloved Weir polo field, where Georgetown's crack polo team had practiced before winning the U.S. Southwestern Region title, was not included. The interstate would gouge a deep path right through it.⁷⁴³ The *Sun* reported,

Owen W. Sherrill, flamboyant realtor of Georgetown and the Southwest, brought the deal to a close. He predicts that the development of industrial, shopping center and residential buildings on the Weir tract will mean great things for Georgetown.⁷⁴⁴

Sherrill touted the development scheme for its natural beauty as well as its "strategic" location on Interstate 35 ("with full interchange") and access to the Georgetown Railroad, which connected to MK&T and MoPac rail lines.⁷⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the development failed to "make."⁷⁴⁶ Eventually, the land was developed into San Gabriel Heights, a pleasant, upper-middle class residential subdivision where the river runs through a number of residents' back yards.

⁷⁴³Georgetown had a terrific polo team in the early Thirties led by one-armed O.W. Cardwell, who played polo by reining with his teeth. Several of his best players included "Doc" (Afton) and "Duddy" (Howard) Weir, whose father, H.M. "Greely" Weir, set up the polo field east of his house off Leander Road. Details can be found in Martha Mitten Allen, ed., *Georgetown's Yesteryears: Reaching for the Gold Ring*, Vol. 1, 1985, Georgetown Heritage Society, Georgetown, 68-82.

⁷⁴⁴" 'Development' Talk Started By Land Sale," Williamson County *Sun*, July 11, 1963

⁷⁴⁵Letter: Sherrill to Pickle, Dec. 3, 1964, Pickle Papers, Center for American History. The buyers were J. Mit Lee and a group of investors from Bryan, Texas.

⁷⁴⁶Sloan, *ibid.*

The interstate opened in September 1965, and Georgetown steeled itself for loss. The local newspaper headline read, “Highway 35 Bypass Opens and All’s Quiet, Very.” The lead read,

State Highway Department officials move the barricades on Interregional Hwy 35 Thursday morning, and by this seemingly mundane act create a moment of history in Georgetown For the present at least, the immediate results will be simply quietness. For the first time in over 100 years, Georgetown will be sidetracked from one of the throbbing arteries of Western Hemisphere commerce. The Chisholm Trail is detoured.⁷⁴⁷

At the next City Council meeting, the Georgetown City Council annexed the interstate.⁷⁴⁸

Round Rock felt that same ominous quietness in 1968 when the last segment of Williamson County’s portion of Interstate 35 was completed. The entire 20.7 mile stretch, from north of Jarrell to south of Round Rock, was budgeted at seven and a half million dollars, but it probably cost more.⁷⁴⁹ Whatever its cost,

⁷⁴⁷“Highway 35 Bypass Opens And All’s Quiet, Very,” *ibid.* I-35 roughly followed the Chisholm Trail’s path through Williamson County.

⁷⁴⁸“City Annexes Highway 35!” Williamson County *Sun*, Oct. 7, 1965

⁷⁴⁹“7.5 Million Interstate 35 Highway Construction Is Scheduled In Williamson County,” Williamson County *Sun*, Feb. 23, 1961; “Highway 35 Bypass Opens And All’s Quiet . . .” *ibid.* In “All’s Quiet,” the *Sun* reported that the county’s 9.7-mile central

since its completion, I-35 has operated like a gigantic magnet in Williamson County, sucking investment money, creative energy, and development into its ever-expanding force field.

But in 1968, few suspected that would be the case. As in Georgetown, Round Rock businessmen were heartsick when I-35 “bypassed” the town. Mays Street, or U.S. Highway 81, lay quiet as a desert at noon. “Most everybody in town thought the interstate would kill Round Rock,” remembered N.G. “Bunky” Whitlow, long-time Round Rock banker. Shortly after I-35 opened to traffic, Whitlow said,

I was working behind the counter at Farmers State Bank when Carlo Carlson came in. Carlo had the Texaco station on Old Highway 81, right in the middle of town. He was a Swede, and real opinionated. “I’ll be damned,” he yelled at me. “There’s a god-damned dog asleep in the middle of the street in front of my station! I want you to come out here and see him.” So I followed Carlo down Main Street, and sure enough, a big old red dog was fast asleep in the middle of Highway 81. There were no cars in sight. Once in a while, one would come along and drive around him.⁷⁵⁰

A fluke brought Westinghouse Corporation to Round Rock, a move that inspired Williamson County’s first aggressive industrial development efforts. The groundwork had been laid with the Georgetown reservoir and Interstate 35, but still, Westinghouse broke the county’s social and economic patterns.

segment of I-35, through Georgetown, cost one million dollars a mile.

⁷⁵⁰Whitlow, July 1, 1998, *ibid.*

Tom E. Nelson Jr. grew up in one of Round Rock's leading families. Nelson's father, Tom E. Nelson, ran Farmers State Bank and farmed in Palm Valley, where *his* father (Tom Jr.'s grandfather) had helped found Palm Valley Lutheran Church. But Nelson moved to Austin as a teenager and moved into more privileged circles.⁷⁵¹ With substantial land holdings in Williamson County and considerable financial training, he prospered. As the 1970's dawned, he helped the Austin Chamber of Commerce snag International Business Machines from Kentucky by securing land for a new headquarters in North Austin.⁷⁵² Through his chamber connections, Nelson heard that Westinghouse Corporation, an industrial giant, was looking for a new plant location.

Without Nelson, Round Rock's maiden courtship with an industrial powerhouse probably would not have happened. But Nelson talked up Round Rock with the Austin chamber, and

⁷⁵¹Tom E. Nelson Jr. attended elementary school in Round Rock, Texas Military Institute in San Antonio, and graduated from Austin High School. He earned a business degree at the University of Texas and married Carol Corley of Austin and settled down to raise a family in Tarrytown. In 1972, when Round Rock's revered Gus Lundelius stepped down as honorary chairman of the board of Farmers State Bank, Nelson bought the bank and appointed N.G. "Bunky" Whitlow as its president. Nelson was appointed a director of the American Bank of Austin in 1972. See "American Bank Adds Director," *Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 19, 1972; *Round Rock Leader*, Jan. 27, 1972.

⁷⁵²Telephone interview: Tom E. Nelson Jr., Oct. 23, 2001, Austin

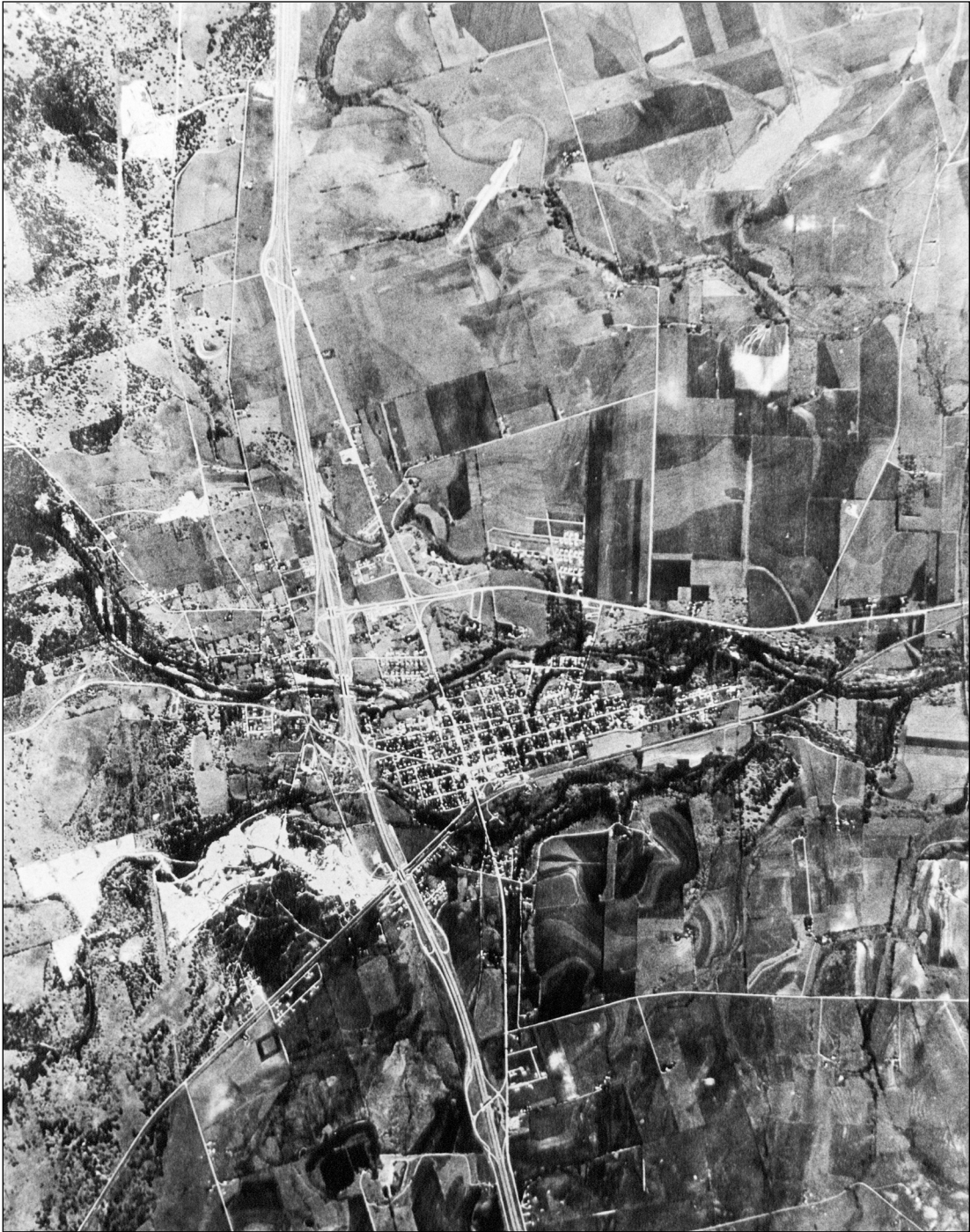


Figure 52: Aerial shot of Round Rock, from about 12,000 feet, in 1968, right after Interstate 35 opened.

ended up, with Austin's blessings, negotiating deals with land owners west of Interstate 35 between Round Rock and Georgetown, within Round Rock's extraterritorial jurisdiction. He negotiated contracts with Raymond Pearson, who owned a Ford-Mercury dealership in Houston, for six hundred and seven acres; rancher Leon E. Behrens, for seven hundred acres; Lamoc Corporation, one thousand forty acres (the land Moses and Tom Kouri had bought, "improved" through successful lobbying for an interchange, and sold); and sheep trader James Garland Walsh, who optioned fourteen hundred acres for a price of roughly a million dollars.⁷⁵³ Altogether, Westinghouse bought outright and optioned thirty-five hundred acres. By Williamson County standards, it was a big spread.

Westinghouse wanted the land for a "new town," a planned community through which private investors could "get into" HUD funds for up to fifty percent of the development's cost, according to one observer.⁷⁵⁴ The target population was thirty-five

⁷⁵³Ibid. Ultimately, Westinghouse did not exercise their option on Walsh's land. Pearson's father was Colonel T.M. Pearson, who had sold land in Friendswood near Houston that became headquarters for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. It is interesting that the Nash, Henna, and Pearson families — owners of Texas auto empires — owned ranches or homes within a few miles of each other in Williamson County.

⁷⁵⁴Telephone interviews: Jim Hislop, Oct. 22, 2001, Round Rock; Nelson, *ibid.* According to Hislop, most of the "New Towns" were created as municipal utility districts, because through them private developers legally "could recover most of what they put in." Hislop and Nelson agreed that the only New Town that ever really "worked" was Reston, Virginia, because, according to Hislop, "Reston got a bunch of industry in there first, so the people who moved there could work there." An investment group started a

thousand — the size of Williamson County.⁷⁵⁵ The model was Reston, Virginia.⁷⁵⁶ “They had ambitions for a model city,” Nelson said. “They spent six or seven hundred thousand dollars on planning. Of course, that was just a book figure since they owned the planning company.” But the prospect of doubling the size of Williamson County boggled many minds, within and outside the county. It got people to thinking. “It would have made such an impact on the communities out there,” Nelson noted, with considerable understatement.

Nelson encouraged his Round Rock friends to throw a party for Westinghouse executives. The party should be pure Williamson County, Nelson advised — barbecue and beer on someone’s patio and a country and western band. The Westinghouse officials, accustomed to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were unsure about the invitation. Would drunken cowboys molest their wives? Could they bring their children? “They just want to get to know you,” Nelson reassured them. “It will be perfect for your kids and wives.” He was right. “These people couldn’t *believe* these folks from Round Rock were treating them so well. They had a great time. That party really sold the place.”

“New Town” near San Antonio called The Ranch, but it did not succeed because the development could offer no jobs, according to Hislop.

⁷⁵⁵Telephone interview: Don J. Leonard, August 1974, Round Rock. In 1970, the U.S. Census put the county’s population at 37,305.

⁷⁵⁶Hislop, *ibid.* Another federally funded “new town” was The Woodlands, north of Houston.

In the spring of 1971, Round Rock officials offered a sweetheart deal to Westinghouse, promising nearly the world in return for the prospect of acquiring a projected fifteen hundred local jobs and a huge residential development to which Round Rock would provide water and sewer. Round Rock made two major concessions: it promised not to annex Westinghouse for seven years; and Westinghouse would not pay a penny for the massive water and sewer system Round Rock would build to service the plant.⁷⁵⁷ Had Westinghouse built its own utilities, its capital outlay would have been an estimated quarter of a million dollars.⁷⁵⁸ Round Rock offered to build the utilities, as long as Westinghouse “would permit sales of 300,000 gallons of water to customers other than Westinghouse.”⁷⁵⁹ Cost to Westinghouse: nothing. Cost to Round Rock: one hundred and sixty thousand dollars.⁷⁶⁰ Westinghouse accepted. By January 1972 company

⁷⁵⁷Letter: Dale Hester to George Chapman, April 23, 1971, City of Round Rock archives. Hester was Round Rock’s mayor; Chapman was Westinghouse’s top man. Also see contract, concluded March 8, 1974, by the City of Round Rock and Westinghouse Corporation.

⁷⁵⁸Letter: Tye Collins to Hester, March 31, 1971, *ibid.* Collins was an engineer with Knowlton-Ratliff-English-Collins, consulting engineers of Fort Worth and Austin, which Round Rock had hired.

⁷⁵⁹Letter: Hester to Chapman, *ibid.*

⁷⁶⁰*Ibid.*, “Water Supply — Westinghouse Plant,” enclosure. Five options were studied; Plan 5, with the lowest cost to Westinghouse and the highest cost to Round Rock, was Round Rock’s choice. As it turned out, the cost ran much higher because the size of the pipeline required by Westinghouse was larger than originally planned. I have not attempted to determine an accurate “final cost,” but according to Round Rock City Council Minutes attached to an agreement between the City of Round Rock and Westinghouse Electric Corporation dated March 9, 1972, Westinghouse would

managers were interviewing candidates for 750 jobs at their eye-popping sixty thousand-square-foot rust-colored facility on Interstate 35.⁷⁶¹

Viewed narrowly, Round Rock fared poorly from its brush with Westinghouse. For one thing, city officials woefully underestimated the operation and maintenance costs of producing and distributing water to Westinghouse. For another, Westinghouse consumed much less water than Round Rock had projected, grossly underestimating 1970 estimates that had determined the cost per thousand gallons of water. (Round Rock had expected its water to cost ten cents per thousand gallons, and billed accordingly. In fact, the actual cost was \$1.08 per thousand — ten times as much.)⁷⁶² The decision to leave Westinghouse outside the corporate city limits meant that Round Rock could not garner tax money from Westinghouse. “That was a mistake,” said a former city official. “We should have annexed the plant.”⁷⁶³ When the 1974 oil crisis hit, the market for the plant’s

front the cost of construction of the water and sewer utility by no more than \$561,000; when Round Rock completed construction it would repay Westinghouse all the advanced monies; and then, pending an Internal Revenue Service ruling, Westinghouse would give Round Rock a “gift” of \$241,000. This suggests that the final rough cost of the utility was \$320,000.

⁷⁶¹Kathleen Sullivan, “Shutdown caps Westinghouse struggle,” Oct. 31, 1986, Austin, G1

⁷⁶²Letter: Stephan L. Sheets to Westinghouse Electric Corporation, Oct. 12, 1978, with attached study, “Cost to Produce and Distribute Water for Westinghouse.” Sheets was Round Rock’s city attorney, and the letter started negotiations for a second seven-year contract with Westinghouse.

⁷⁶³Telephone interview: Jim Hislop, Oct. 22, 2001, Round Rock

product — gargantuan gas turbines used by power plants to generate electricity — dried up overnight. Westinghouse shut down to retool and cut four hundred jobs.⁷⁶⁴ The “new town” was stillborn. “The Westinghouse development deal turned on profits they were going to make selling those turbines,” said an observer. “The idea of a ‘new town’ was peaches on top of the ice cream.”⁷⁶⁵ Instead, Westinghouse went on a diet.

But the broader lessons of Westinghouse taught Round Rock valuable lessons. It established the village as a major industrial recruitment player. It taught Round Rock how to capture industrial prospects years before “economic development” became a Texas watchword. It motivated Round Rock to become a big-time industrial center: the city owned water and sewer utilities halfway to Georgetown, and it needed to sell the utility’s products. Round Rock’s experience with Westinghouse also taught a prime lesson. Round Rock needed industrial and commercial development. Former city manager Jim Hislop noted,

⁷⁶⁴Sullivan, *ibid.* Eventually, Westinghouse built back up to eight hundred and fifty workers. But in 1986 corporate officials announced Westinghouse would halt manufacturing operations in Round Rock. On January 1, 1988, three hundred of four hundred and fifty employees were laid off and production was moved to Taiwan. A joint venture, TECO Electric and Machinery Corporation, continues to utilize the old plant. Also see Mark Mitchell, “Westinghouse looks to year 101,” *Williamson County Sun*, Jan. 8, 1986, I-3; Mitchell, “Westinghouse destiny chills area leaders,” *Sun*, Nov. 21, 1986, I-1; Mitchell, “Down and out: Westinghouse’s loyal corps,” *Sun*, Jan. 10, 1988, I-1.

⁷⁶⁵Hislop, *ibid.*

When I got there and started looking at the books, I realized that single family residential [development] couldn't pay for itself. You could have three kinds of development: multi-family residential, commercial, or industrial. The importance of Westinghouse wasn't that our skirts were tied to Westinghouse. It was that we realized what we had to have. And then we went after McNeil Laboratories. When we got them, we said, 'We can do this!' Up to that time, we thought Westinghouse was a fluke!⁷⁶⁶

Out of its relationship with Westinghouse came an impressive series of industrial relocations to Round Rock. In the next decade McNeil Laboratories moved there. So did Farmers Insurance Group, Hughes Tool Company, Texas Tool and Fastener, Cypress Semiconductor Corporation, AMP Packaging Systems, Inc., Tellabs Texas Inc., Weed Instrument Inc., Du Pont Tau Laboratories, Texas Nuclear Corporation, Applied Information Memories Inc., Carroll Touch Industries and others. Some of these ventures moved, were sold, or failed, but others always seemed to be waiting in the wings to come to Round Rock.⁷⁶⁷ Thousands of jobs were created between 1972, when Westinghouse opened, and 1986, when the collapse of oil prices and Texas financial institutions contracted the economy. Nonetheless, Round Rock's population grew from 2,811 in 1970

⁷⁶⁶Hislop, *ibid.*

⁷⁶⁷Terry Goodrich, ". . . to tour sites," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 13, 1984; Mark Mitchell, "Round Rock's industry success glitters," *Sun*, April 24, 1985; I-5; Mitchell, "Round Rock recruits a new computer plant," *Sun*, Oct. 12, 1986; Paul Schnitt, "Round Rock basks in recruiting victories," *American-Statesman*, Dec. 4, 1986, A-1

to 12,740 in 1980 to 30,923 in 1990 to 61,136 in 2000.⁷⁶⁸ Counting Round Rock's unincorporated developments within its extra-territorial jurisdiction, representing a steady five hundred percent growth rate over forty years — virtually unprecedented anywhere over that long a time span.⁷⁶⁹

Westinghouse gave Round Rock confidence and a national reputation for its kindness to big corporations, especially high-tech ones. When California's Cypress Semiconductor met with Austin and Round Rock recruiters, Round Rock Mayor Mike Robinson "reached into his pocket, pulled out a building permit and handed it to Cypress."⁷⁷⁰ The Cypress search team canceled its plane reservations, drove to Round Rock, and chose a site. "When did we see the light?" asked banker Whitlow. "It was in 1972, when Westinghouse came to town. That was when we realized what Round Rock could become, though we never imagined the size of it."⁷⁷¹ Westinghouse figured large in Georgetown's subsequent development, too, but in a different way. Many of Westinghouse's managers and engineers moved to Georgetown because it offered more housing choices, a serene university setting, and a courthouse square dripping with

⁷⁶⁸U.S. Census

⁷⁶⁹Hislop, *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁰Schnitt, *ibid.*

⁷⁷¹Interview: Whitlow, July 1, 1998. Whitlow was appointed president of Farmers State Bank Jan. 27, 1972, after Tom Nelson Jr. bought the bank from Tom Joseph. To many observers, it appeared that Whitlow was Round Rock's behind-the-scenes leader throughout much of the Seventies and Eighties.

potential charm. The Westinghouse families' influence on the community led directly to a more open, professional city government emphasizing citizen oversight and planning — a movement that tended to cast a wary eye on unbridled development.⁷⁷² Leo Wood, Georgetown's city manager from 1968 to 1985, vividly recalls the Westinghouse effect. "When Westinghouse came, what a change!" he exclaimed.

. . . Their people had different personalities from what we were used to, different thoughts on the planning process. Most of them came from Pittsburgh or Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. They had seen growth and didn't necessarily like what they saw. They got very involved, helped set the tone and policy for our comprehensive plan. People like Frank and Helen Hubbard and MaryEllen Kersch came out of that. That was the era.⁷⁷³

⁷⁷²This could qualify as a chapter on its own. Georgetown's on-going desire for "transparent," well-planned development repeatedly collided with its baser needs (such as a commercial and industrial tax base), resulting in occasional rejections of mayors and city managers. Among these were Leo Wood, Bob Hart, and MaryEllen Kersch. The trend that Westinghouse perhaps started (though some might argue that Southwestern University played this role earlier) accelerated in the 1990s when the Del Webb Corporation built Sun City, and Georgetown took it into its corporate limits.

⁷⁷³Interview, Leo Wood, June 30, 1998, Georgetown. Some years after he left the city manager's position, Wood was elected mayor of Georgetown, a position he held during this interview. In the spring of 1999, he was defeated by MaryEllen Kersh, a "newcomer" who had arrived with IBM's first influx. In an ironic twist, in early 2002, Mayor Kersh was recalled in Georgetown's first recall election, largely by votes by "newcomers" from Del Webb Sun City, an age-restricted planned community.

In 1972, the year Westinghouse opened, Bobby Stanton arrived in Georgetown. After his graduation from the University of Texas at Austin, Stanton had taught flying at Tim's Air Park, a small private airport just off I-35 near Pflugerville. Soon he was managing the airport, a job that chiefly consisted of pumping aviation fuel. He got to know Walter Yates, an aviation buff who spent summers prospecting for gold in Alaska. Yates owned three hundred acres of land two miles west of I-35 on Andice Road northwest of Georgetown. Stanton wanted to buy and develop Yates' land, but he had no money. Happily for him, Georgetown Savings & Loan wanted to get into the development business.⁷⁷⁴ A deal was struck.

By year's end, Stanton had carved winding roads, set up utility service, and opened the rambling Serenada Country Estates, the first major development "across the interstate" from Georgetown — and the county's largest. It was an immediate success. Employees of three nearby "blue chip" technological companies — I.B.M., Texas Instruments, and Westinghouse —

⁷⁷⁴Interview: Bob Stanton, July 8, 1998, Georgetown. Also see "Stanton the man: how he developed," *The Sunday Sun*, Nov. 20, 1983, Georgetown, A-1. Georgetown Savings & Loan was owned by Grogan Lord, who brought in "Skip" Morse and Jay Sloan to "grow" his Georgetown financial institutions. Their interest in Stanton's land may have been triggered when Austin Savings & Loan "took over" San Gabriel Heights in southwest Georgetown. "The local S&L people thought if outsiders were coming in to do a development, maybe they should, too," Stanton said.

made up roughly fifty percent of Serenada's home owners. The development lay outside Georgetown's corporate limits, but inside Georgetown's public school district. "I-35 obviously played a major role in making it work," Stanton mused years later. When Serenada Country Estates opened, Austin was twenty-five minutes away, with little traffic. "What interested me about the land was that beautiful tree'd stuff," he said. "It was close to Georgetown, but not too close — no taxes. And I guess everybody had heard about the lake."⁷⁷⁵

Stanton next acquired land from I.M. Hausenfluck, whose family had ranched west of Georgetown for generations. Hausenfluck's land became Sanaloma Estates, just north of Georgetown Municipal Airport.⁷⁷⁶ Between 1972 and 1986, Stanton acquired roughly four thousand acres northwest of Georgetown, conveniently close (but not too close) to I-35. He personally created, in addition to Serenada Country Estates and Sanaloma, Serenada West, Serenada East, Brangus Ranch, Air Country Estates, Reata Trails, Logan Ranch and Berry Creek subdivisions. Together, they physically dominated Georgetown.⁷⁷⁷ On a map, they look larger than Del Webb's Sun City, the age-restricted

⁷⁷⁵Stanton, *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷Maps: "Welcome to Georgetown Texas," 1992, Mosher-Adams, Inc., Oak Creek, Wisconsin (on which Stanton marked his developments); "North Half and South Half Williamson County, Texas," 1969, Tobin Surveys Inc., San Antonio; "Williamson County, Texas," 1999, John V. Cotter, Map Ventures, Pflugerville, Texas; "Stanton the man," *ibid.*;

planned community which in May 1995 broke ground, which almost overnight changed the city's demographics and politics.⁷⁷⁸ Before Sun City, Stanton had developed the bulk of Georgetown west of I-35, which today dwarfs "Old Georgetown." Stanton's genius flowered during a time when commuting in Texas was seen as a civilized pastime for upper-middle class professionals. His developments west of Interstate 35 reflect what he believed commuters wanted. He lived the life himself, except for working in Georgetown, not Austin. While developing Serenada Country Estates, Stanton built a house in the middle of his subdivision for his family. He lives there still. "I lived right in the center of my little world," he said. If somebody's toilet didn't work, it was, 'Call Stanton.' If there was a hole in the road, 'Call Stanton.' It never entered my mind to make a bunch of money and skip the country."⁷⁷⁹ He had no grand strategy other than to

⁷⁷⁸By 2002, Sun City's voters had killed a school bond floated by Jarrell Independent School District, which lay inside part of the development which was to build out to 9,000 "units," or houses; vetoed a Georgetown City Council bond proposal for library and parks additions; and kicked out Mayor Kersh in a recall election that split Georgetown down the middle, between "Old Town" and west of Interstate 35, particularly Sun City and Berry Creek.

⁷⁷⁹Interview: Stanton, July 10, 1998, Georgetown. Like many Texas developers, Stanton nearly lost everything during the 1986 real estate bust. He had just finished developing Berry Creek, with a beautiful eighteen-hole golf course and a deluxe country club when Texas' financial bubble burst, and he had to give up ownership of his pet project. Since then he has several smaller projects for low- to middle-income homeowners, including Crystal Knoll Terrace and Raintree east of Old Georgetown.

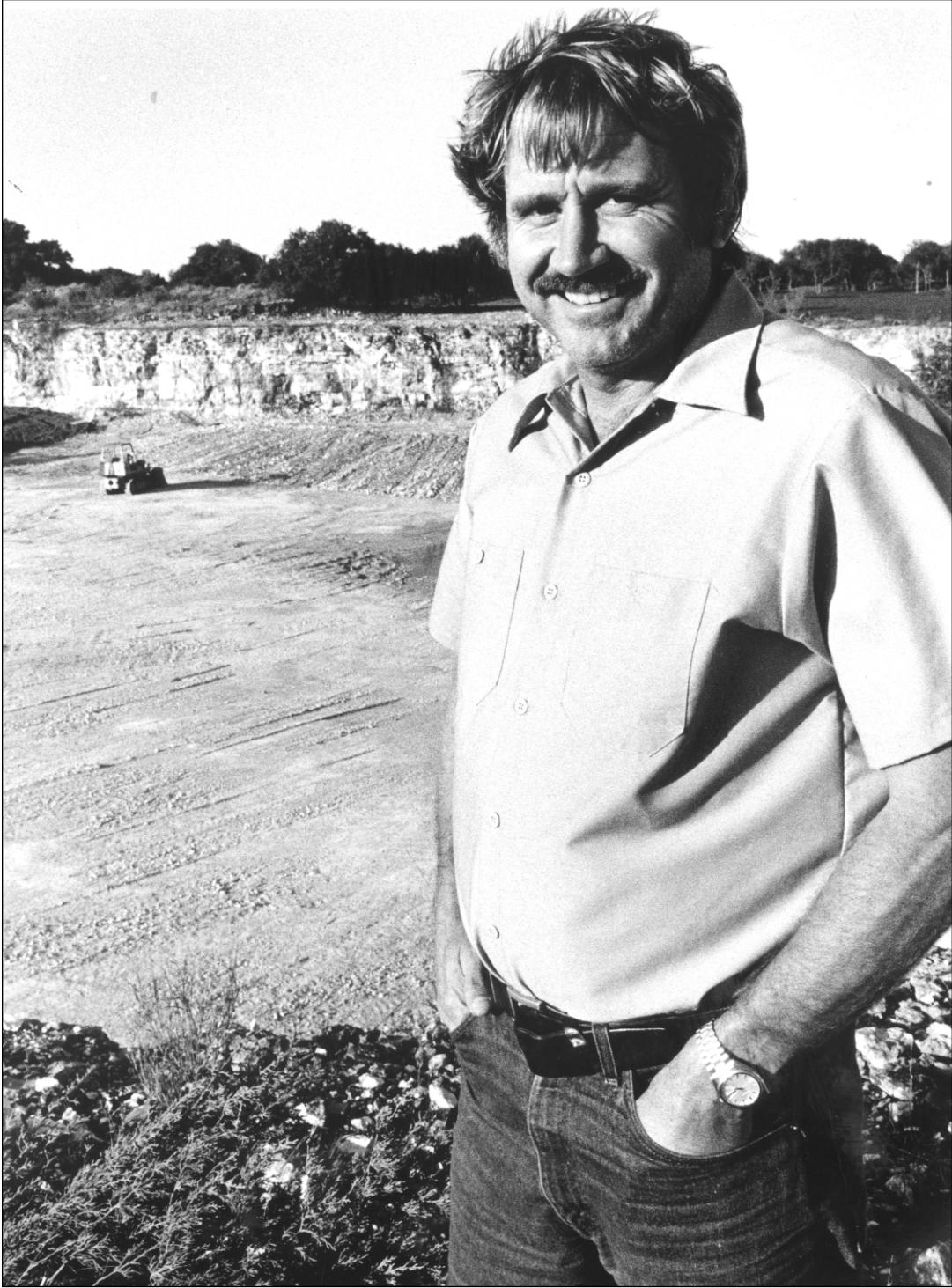


Figure 53: Bobby Stanton at the Berry Creek golf course he built in 1983.

. . . focus on where I lived, within a three-mile radius. I did have this idea about Andice Road [which leads to Sun City and Andice]. I just knew it would develop. Eventually, I owned all the land on Andice Road starting at the strip center next to The Pit to three miles out, except for two eighty-acre tracts. Once I paid \$12,000 an acre for the land where the bank and strip center are. Even I wondered whether I paid too much. But that land sold the other day for seven dollars a foot, \$280,000 an acre.⁷⁸⁰

“Bobby Stanton was probably the first person to envision modern Georgetown,” said Bill Snead, president and owner of Texas Crushed Stone, located west of Interstate 35 and north of the Westinghouse plant. “I think Stanton was the unrecognized pioneer of modern Georgetown. Just think about what he did — Serenada, Berry Creek, McDonald’s.”⁷⁸¹ Few people in Georgetown know about Stanton’s land sale to McDonald’s. “It was this thing I had about Andice Road,” he said. “As an investment, I bought a couple of acres where I-35 met Andice Road. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out it was going to be a major corner.” Old-timers shook their heads. “It was said he paid one hundred thousand dollars for that old house and

⁷⁸⁰Stanton, *ibid.*

⁷⁸¹Interview: Bill Snead, July 2, 1998, Georgetown. Aside from Southwestern University and government, Texas Crushed Stone has been Georgetown’s largest employer. It moved to Georgetown from Austin in 1958, before Interstate 35 was built, because of the excellent rail connections it acquired on the site. But after I-35 arrived, the company handsomely capitalized on its enhanced capacity for trucking crushed stone to Austin and points around the state.

property,” said one. “Everybody thought he was crazy. We thought people were taking advantage of this young stranger.”⁷⁸² Then McDonald’s bought the land. The corner proved a gold mine, for Stanton and for the world’s most popular chain of hamburger joints.

Underneath the individual stories, what happened when the interstate showed up in Williamson County? Economically, how did I-35 change the lives of farmers, ranchers, investors, and townspeople? Did I-35 trigger a post-modern version of the “unearned increment” in land values vilified by the seventeenth-century British philosopher, John Stuart Mill? To unlock the landed gentry’s stranglehold on Great Britain’s land, Mill suggested a state tax on any “unearned increase” in the value of land when the owner made no “exertion or sacrifice” to that end. Mill wrote,

Now, the labors of the nation at large do add daily and yearly to the value of the land, whether the landlord plays the part of an improver or not. The growth of towns, the extension of manufactures, the increase of population consequent on increased employment, create a constantly increasing demand for land By this increase of demand

⁷⁸²Interview: Sam Brady, July 7, 1998, Georgetown

the landed proprietors largely profit, without in any way contributing to it.⁷⁸³

But Mill tried to reform land laws in a country where a tiny proportion of its citizens owned virtually all the land. European peasant proprietors, “in the ungrudging and assiduous application of their own labour and care,” were an entirely different matter.⁷⁸⁴ His tax proposals would not have touched such a land owner, for that land owner would have earned the increase in his land’s value. To a great extent, before Interstate 35 arrived, Williamson County land owners fit Mill’s description of peasant proprietors, though “peasant” is not a word lightly applied to American farmers.⁷⁸⁵ Black Waxy farmers, many descended from European proprietor peasants, and Balcones Escarpment ranchers, many descended from Scots-Irish via the Ozarks and Appalachia, did not remotely resemble Mill’s landed gentry, who idled while tenant workers toiled on their land, paying rent “that runs into men’s mouths as they sleep.”⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸³John Stuart Mill, “The Right of Property in Land,” London *Examiner*, July 19, 1873, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. III, *Newspaper Writings*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, University of Toronto Press, Toronto

⁷⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁵To some extent, Lake Granger and Lake Georgetown transformed property values around them, though not so dramatically as the interstate.

⁷⁸⁶Mill, “Should Public Bodies Be Required to Sell Their Lands?” London *Examiner*, Jan. 11, 1873, *ibid.*

Nor was the interstate's impact on rural property values always a good thing, as Charles Forbes discovered to his sorrow. Much has been written about the impact of America's interstate system on urban property values, where engineers sometimes rammed six or eight divided lanes, plus two sets of access roads, through the hearts of dense neighborhoods that never recovered from the shock. Williamson County experienced a rural twist to the urban tale. Some people benefited; some suffered. Some rural towns boomed; others died.

Among those who benefited from I-35 were a number of ranchers who had struggled to survive the Fifties. As the highway builders approached them with right-of-way offers, most of these ranchers immediately cashed out. Some felt nostalgia, even grief. But now they had money in the bank, some for the first time in their lives. Former Round Rock Councilman S.C. Inman Jr. inherited ninety acres of land west of U.S. Highway 81 on the north side of town, across the highway from the Texas Baptist Children's Home. Inman farmed his inherited land for a decade. "One year it got so dry nothing came up, so I had to go to work for someone else," he said. He and his wife ran The Clay Pot, a downtown eatery, to make a little cash.⁷⁸⁷ Of the arrival of Interstate 35, he said,

⁷⁸⁷Interview: S.C. Inman, Jr., July 1, 1998, Round Rock. The Inmans eventually sold the restaurant to a Taylor man for \$500.

There never was anybody who really wants a highway to go through their place, and yet, you're sort of hoping it *will*. Dad had tried to sell the place for years and years. Nobody would look at it. Then I got this call from some fellow representing the highway department. He said, 'I'll give you one hundred dollars an acre for the land and the house, which came to eight thousand, eight hundred dollars. I knew I couldn't do better. I wanted more, but it was okay.'⁷⁸⁸

Had Inman been able to hold onto his land until a speculative buyer like Stanton or Kouri came along, his land probably would have fetched much more. Still, it was a relief to be shed of his land. He professes no regrets.

For Georgetown rancher Frank Hausenfluck, the development spawned by Interstate 35 spurred a huge "unearned increment" in his favor. Stanton worked the numbers on a tract formerly owned by Hausenfluck on Andice Road near Sun City — two and a half acres, sold in the late 1990's for \$125,000. "I'll bet you Frank made more money off that little transaction than he did working his whole life running cattle ten hours a day," Stanton said. When the land deals were concluded, Frank Hausenfluck ended up with something like half a million dollars, Stanton estimated. Not an inconsequential amount of money, perhaps, but hardly a vast amount for a life's worth of back-breaking work on a knob of land that produced prickly pear cactus, post oak, cedar and livestock.

⁷⁸⁸Inman, *ibid*.

Williamson County experienced Interstate 35 as an onslaught of Federal power. The road was created in Washington and Austin; it would change everything it touched, depending on how local city officials, citizens groups, and entrepreneurs reacted to it. As a public works project, the interstate can be seen as a collage of forces — utopian, bureaucratic, democratic-populist, small-town boosterism, and capitalism writ large, represented in Williamson County by people like Forbes, Kouri and Stanton. Overall, the “local interests” provided a surprisingly sensible balance (with significant help from the Texas Highway Department) against a Federal enterprise that was theoretically apolitical and rigidly egalitarian, but which failed to measure up to either of these goals. The nation’s top highway engineers, so the theory went, would build the best highways for the greatest good, without political interference. Since Congress mandated the interstate system as a national concept, rather than requiring legislation for each individual road (as they did for dams), members of Congress did not often challenge the interstate builders. When Congress did challenge the program, it targeted waste and graft, not poor planning. With few exceptions, until the interstates were well under way, Congress did not question the astonishing lack of regard that the interstate’s builders seemed to have for the poor and powerless who happened to live in the way — whether black and Hispanic residents of East Austin, Jarrell’s Czech farmers, or even S.C. Inman, Jr. Ironically, as the highway

builders rolled their ribbon of asphalt across Williamson County, the “locals” — chamber boosters, public officials, businessmen, and real estate developers — discerned the course of the population surges the highway would bring to Williamson County far more acutely than the interstate’s creators ever did.

Epilogue

A Place Remade

Round Rock led the transformation of Williamson County. When Jim Hislop arrived in 1973, fresh out of college with a degree in planning, to interview for a job as Round Rock's first city manager, he was "dumber than a boxload of rocks, but I thought I was smart," he said. Until someone called him about the job, he had never heard of Round Rock. This was not surprising, since the town was indistinguishable from most other tiny Texas towns, except that it was usually coated with white dust from an old lime plant. Its population sign on the edge of town read

2,811. But the city's leaders had decided they needed someone with skills and smarts to profitably "grow" Round Rock.

Hislop blanched when he looked at the city's financial books and realized that the city had, at best, three thousand dollars in the bank.⁷⁸⁹ The job paid something like seven hundred dollars a month.⁷⁹⁰ "I was amazed," he confessed. "I decided right then I should go to graduate school. I walked across the street to the bank, where I was supposed to get introduced, to tell them I couldn't take the job. But when I came out, I decided to take it. I thought if any group of people wanted it that bad I would go for the deal."⁷⁹¹ His planning school friends in Houston thought he had lost his mind.⁷⁹²

Round Rock has "gone for the deal" ever since. The men who convinced Hislop he could turn Round Rock into an astonishing success story wanted growth — first-rate growth — at an embryonic stage of the town's development. But the little city had big problems. Westinghouse, the feather in Round Rock's cap two years earlier, threatened financial disaster. Because of Westinghouse, the city had built an extensive waterworks system, but few customers had hooked on. The thirty-odd thousand people Round Rock had expected to populate Westinghouse's "new town" weren't going to materialize. Round Rock was

⁷⁸⁹Interview: Jim Hislop, July 2, 1998, Georgetown

⁷⁹⁰Interview: Bob Bennett, Sept. 14, 2000, Round Rock

⁷⁹¹Hislop, *ibid.*

⁷⁹²Bennett, *ibid.*

growing, as Anglos fled a new Austin public school policy of busing minority students to traditionally “white” schools, but Round Rock’s residential boomlet did little to subdue its economic headaches.⁷⁹³ Interstate 35 made it easy for people to move to Round Rock and commute to Austin, but its schools were overflowing.

Round Rock’s leaders wanted to capture industry that would buy the new city utility services and pay city taxes. Soon the city would control enough water to serve any number of industries and subdivisions. “The deciding factor was the acquisition of water from Lake Georgetown,” Hislop said. “Without that water, we never could have gotten McNeil Laboratories, Cypress Semiconductor, or Dell.”⁷⁹⁴ But another factor played a critical part in Round Rock’s industrial development. It was the “people’s desire to grow,” Hislop said. “It was incredible. Usually twenty percent of a community wants growth. But in Round Rock, *everybody* was in on the deal.”

If a town could be genetically encoded, Round Rock’s genes would have been strongly pragmatic. It had rebuilt seventy years before after a flood erased much of its first “Old Town.”⁷⁹⁵ It had clung to life through the Depression. Compared to Georgetown and Taylor, Round Rock had few “airs.” Compared to other Texas

⁷⁹³Mark Mitchell, “Boom. Bust. Comeback.” Williamson County *Sun*, Sept. 30, 1998, E-8.

⁷⁹⁴Hislop, *ibid.*

⁷⁹⁵This was the “Old Town” that Helen Irvin tried to save from I-35.

small towns, it appears to have been surprisingly egalitarian. Few blacks lived there, but members of an active Mexican-American community owned half a dozen mainstream businesses, and these people were actively politically. While Hislop ran the city, an African-American and a Mexican-American sat on the city council, and Hispanics filled other key public service slots. In the 1970's, this was not the norm in Williamson County.⁷⁹⁶

During Hislop's four years as city manager, Round Rock grew from approximately 3,500 to fifteen thousand people, a three hundred percent growth rate. By the year 2000, the city's population had reached sixty-one thousand.⁷⁹⁷ Between 1975 and 2000, Round Rock sustained a growth rate of 1,600 percent, one of the highest long-term growth rates anywhere in the United States. "The overriding force was . . . the people wanted it. They never varied from the course. Round Rock's been really lucky about that," Hislop said. In his view, the man who ran Farmers State Bank, N.G. "Bunky" Whitlow, was a major force behind the phenomenon. As principal of Round Rock High School, Whitlow had introduced his students to the "magic" of high technology, in the form of a tape recorder. In the Seventies and Eighties, he became Round Rock's "magic" high-tech recruiter.

⁷⁹⁶Garfield W. McConico served on the Round Rock Council for twelve years, part of that time as mayor pro tem. Lorenzo Rubio also served on the council. At the same time, Issaac Lopez, Jr., was a member of the Round Rock Independent School Board, and Chris Perez was a director of the Chamber of Commerce.

⁷⁹⁷2000 Census of the Population

“The fact is that Round Rock would not have grown as fast as it did and with the quality it did if Whitlow had not been there,” Hislop said. “If Nolan Ryan had come to Round Rock with a baseball team in 1973, a stadium would have been built in four or five days. Bunky would have declared one of his work days, and everybody would have pitched in. Anybody who owned a bulldozer or road grader or any piece of equipment would have been out there clearing ditches. The stadium would have been up in two weeks.”⁷⁹⁸

In the summer of 1976, Round Rock ran out of water. Brushy Creek went dry. Round Rock’s wells went dry. Lake Georgetown was still a couple of years from completion. Industrial prospects evaporated. The council declared a water emergency and slapped a moratorium on development, a desperate measure. Here was “go-go” Round Rock, the envy of small-town Texas’ industrial recruiters, dying of thirst. Hislop telephoned an old planning school buddy who was working in Houston’s planning department. “The stove tank’s dry and the fish are dead in the creek,” Hislop said. “Bobbo, I need you.”⁷⁹⁹ Thus, Round Rock acquired Bob Bennett, who became its first official planner, took over as city manager when Hislop left in

⁷⁹⁸Hislop, *ibid.*

⁷⁹⁹Bennett, *ibid.*

1977, and still directs the city's affairs.⁸⁰⁰ By almost everyone's measure, he is one of Texas' outstanding city managers.

How did Round Rock turn itself into such a powerhouse? Bennett's thoughts echo Hislop's: the crucial elements were water, the interstate, and "will power." But he credits Hislop, too. Bennett remembers,

We'd be riding around at night in Hislop's old truck, drinking beer, and he'd be seeing it, pointing it out: "Here's where fifteen blue chips will be lined up." There was nothing there, just old ranch country. He could drive you around in the truck and almost convince you of anything. At first, I thought, he's nuts. Then, you start thinking, he's right! This is just waiting to happen. He had the vision. It was never anything less than that.⁸⁰¹

Of Round Rock's future, Bennett thinks "it's going to be the fulfillment of Jim's dream. The growth is going to continue; it's only going to get bigger. We'll be a major high-tech center for the state of Texas."⁸⁰²

⁸⁰⁰Bennett briefly retired to work for a development company which went broke after the economic collapse of 1986. Round Rock welcomed him back with open arms.

⁸⁰¹Bennett, *ibid.*

⁸⁰²*Ibid.*

In much of Williamson County, it took years for the results of the road and river projects to make themselves felt, though Round Rock and Granger felt the impact quickly. At Round Rock's Farmers State Bank, deposits rose from \$1.6 million in 1958 to fifty-five million dollars in 1979, when the bank moved its headquarters to the corner of Interstate 35 and State Highway 79. The bank had paid Louis Henna \$17,500 an acre for his land at that intersection. Had the "army colony" won its battle to move the interstate half a mile west, that land would have been worth far less. The new bank faced I-35. The bank developed a shopping center on the rest of Henna's land, which stretched east to Old Highway 81.⁸⁰³

As soon as the Corps started buying out the farmers whose land blocked Laneport dam, Granger felt pain. During the years of land acquisition, nearly half of Granger's school students, about two hundred, moved away with their displaced families.⁸⁰⁴ The 10,765 acres that the government purchased immediately fell off the local tax rolls; that land's 1976 assessed value of \$1,265,960 cost the school district nineteen thousand dollars in lost taxes the first year. Over the years, the land's tax exempt status has cost Granger's public school system approximately three million

⁸⁰³Whitlow, *ibid.* Property values later increased so much that Henna kidded Whitlow that he had "stolen" Henna's land.

⁸⁰⁴Interview: Loretta Mikulencak, July 6, 1998, Granger

dollars in taxes.⁸⁰⁵ That does not include the value to the local economy of agricultural production that would have come out of that land, which a 1973 Texas A&M report rated as the most productive non-irrigated land in Texas.⁸⁰⁶

In 1985, all property in Granger's school district was valued at \$124 million.⁸⁰⁷ Sixteen years later, in the year 2001, the market value of property within Granger Independent School District was \$142 million. Considering the astonishing rise in the value of land throughout the Austin area during the same period, this was a paltry show of growth indeed. In 1960, when Granger Lake still seemed a hare-brained scheme, 1,400 people called Granger home. In the year 2000, 1,299 lived there. Granger's African-American population dropped in half in the interim, while Hispanics doubled their numbers. Of the four cities most directly affected by Williamson County's road and river projects, Granger was the poorest in 1990, with a median household income of \$15,338, about half that of west Williamson County's.⁸⁰⁸

Round Rock's raw numbers tell a different story. Between 1960 and 1970, it barely grew, from 2,458 to 2,811 residents.⁸⁰⁹

⁸⁰⁵Mikulencak, *ibid.*, In a memorandum dated Jan. 1, 1976, Mikulencak, the school district's tax assessor-collector, verified the 1976 figures.

⁸⁰⁶Bridgette Cavanaugh, "Granger Dam," Nov. 26, 1973, *ibid.*

⁸⁰⁷"Granger ISD," Aug. 3, 1986, Williamson County Appraisal District, Georgetown

⁸⁰⁸1980, 1990, 2000 Census of the Population — Characteristics of the Population, Texas

⁸⁰⁹*Ibid.*

The market value of property there roughly equaled Granger's, though land was cheaper. (Before the interstate highway loomed, it was possible to buy ranch land for thirty-five to fifty dollars an acre.)⁸¹⁰ But by 1985, Round Rock's population was 15,000 and the market value of property in its school district was \$4.9 billion. In the year 2000, it was a city of 61,136. The market value of property in the sprawling school district, which lapped over into Travis County, was \$13.7 billion — half the valuation of all property in Williamson County.⁸¹¹ Dell Computer, a world leader in computers, was Round Rock's chief employer, with sixteen thousand employees.⁸¹² A great deal of Round Rock's wealth sprang from Lake Georgetown's water supply and several men's imaginative vision, on top of Interstate 35 and proximity to Austin.

By the end of the twentieth century, the old Georgetown-Taylor rivalry had faded into insignificance. Few people in either city remembered it. The two towns, once well matched, had taken

⁸¹⁰Whitlow, *ibid.*

⁸¹¹“Certified Appraisal Roll ARB Approved Totals Central Appraisal District, July 18, 2001, Williamson County Appraisal District, Georgetown. Austin Community College lies within Round Rock's school district but outside Williamson County.

⁸¹²“Certified Appraisal Roll ARB Approved Totals RNDROCK ISD,” *ibid.*; City of Round Rock Public Affairs Department. Dell moved to Round Rock in 1996 and employed 22,000 on its campus there until the economic contractions of 2001. In fiscal 2000, the taxable value of its plant was approximately \$187 million, resulting in property taxes to Round Rock of \$677,565, of which 75 percent was rebated to Dell per the economic development agreement; in 2004 50 percent of property taxes would be paid. Dell also paid \$20.5 million in sales taxes to Round Rock in 2000, of which \$6.26 million was rebated to Dell.

different trajectories. In 1960, Taylor was twice as large as Georgetown, with 9,500 to 5,450 citizens, and far richer.⁸¹³ In 1970, after Interstate 35 went through Georgetown, the county seat started catching up, with 6,395 residents against Taylor's 9,616. Ten years later, in 1980, Georgetown nearly equaled Taylor's population count, 9,468 to 10,619. Median household incomes in the two cities were almost identical: \$15,213 in Georgetown and \$15,724 in Taylor.⁸¹⁴ But in 1985, Georgetown's school district property values had grown to \$1.3 billion, compared to \$400 million in Taylor.⁸¹⁵ In 1990, Georgetown reached the 14,842 population mark, compared to Taylor's 11,472, and had outgained Taylor in median household income by \$25,965 to \$21,160. In 2000, the disparity had widened. Georgetown had 28,339 citizens inside its city limits but an effective population of about 36,000; Taylor had 13,575. As to the relative wealth of the two cities, a gulf yawned. In 2001, the market value of property within Taylor's school district was \$723 million. In Georgetown, it was \$3.5 billion.⁸¹⁶

In the space of two decades, the weight of the county's wealth and economic creativity had shifted from the east to west Williamson County. By 1990, the three cities with the highest median family incomes — Round Rock, Cedar Park, and Leander

⁸¹³U.S. Census

⁸¹⁴Ibid., Round Rock had jumped way ahead: In 1980 its median household income was \$23,185 and its city population was 11,812.

⁸¹⁵Williamson County Appraisal District, 1985 certified values

⁸¹⁶Ibid., 2001 certified values

— had virtually merged into one ever-expanding mass of Subdivision Land.⁸¹⁷ Most of the new citizens of Williamson County voted Republican.

Democratic Party power politics was largely responsible for Williamson County's new river and road, and the money stream they created.⁸¹⁸ Ironically, the engineering projects, in theory politically neutral, erased the county's historic loyalty to the Democratic Party and gave birth to Republican Party dominance. Suburbia first joined, then swamped, agrarianism. In 1973, the Republican Party "held its county convention in a 1972 Pontiac Catalina." Active Republicans in Williamson County could ride around in one car, drinking beer and electing precinct officials.

It would have been unthinkable to have a Republican candidate for county or precinct office, much less a Republican office holder. But today, the Democrats maintain a tenuous hold on only two of 27 offices: commissioner and justice of the peace . . . ⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁷2000 Census of the Population. 1990 figures are the latest available for this category. In 1990 Cedar Park's median household income was \$33,446, Round Rock's was \$33,228, and Leander's was \$31,089. Interestingly, the median household of all of Williamson County was higher than than any of its cities — \$33,695 — suggesting that many of the county's wealthiest residents live in huge, unincorporated subdivisions or municipal utility districts, such as Anderson Mill and Brushy Creek.

⁸¹⁸President Eisenhower was the notable exception, but the interregional highway concept had been supported by Democratic presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

⁸¹⁹Billy Ray Stubblefield, "In quarter century, political life takes revolutionary turn," Williamson County *Sun*, Sept. 30, 1998.

That was written in 1998. After the 2000 elections, not one county Democratic office holder remained. Respected and competent public officials fledged in the Democratic Party had defected to the Republicans.⁸²⁰ They could not say so, but they were forced to switch parties if they wished to keep their jobs. It was a question of demographics, plain and simple. In 1973, the county had about forty thousand residents. By 1998, Williamson County had 130,000 registered voters, three times the county's population twenty-five years earlier. Most of the new residents were Republicans. At Georgetown's Del Webb Sun City, for example, between seventy-five and eighty percent of the 4,100 residents considered themselves Republican.⁸²¹ In both Round Rock and Georgetown, community cohesiveness was cracking along the Balcones rift line: east of Interstate 35 was generally less affluent and more liberal (in Georgetown, more committed to controlling growth), while west of the interstate people were whiter, richer, more conservative and more likely to commute to work. Local politics got nastier and more expensive.⁸²²

⁸²⁰These included District Judge Stubblefield and former District Attorney Ken Anderson, one of the leading vote getters in the county, now District Judge Anderson.

⁸²¹"Gaz" Green, Feb. 19, 2002, Georgetown; Ricia Gittins, Feb. 23, 2002, Georgetown

⁸²²Jeff Dorsch, "Mayor recalled; May elections start," Williamson County *Sun*, Feb. 6, 2002, A-1; Tony Plohetsky, "Winds of change in Round Rock," Feb. 28, 2002, Austin *American-Statesman*

As the county grew increasingly suburban and Republican, the ethnic enclaves that once characterized its rural “neighborhoods” disappeared. There are still disproportionately large numbers of Germans in Walburg, Czechs in Granger, and Swedes in Hutto and Round Rock, but they no longer form tight clans. In fact, they have been swallowed, rendered invisible by waves of newcomers. At the same time, the county became “whiter” and much more homogeneous. While Blacks and Hispanics have moved into Williamson County in impressive numbers over the last twenty years, the overwhelming tide of Anglo immigrants has swallowed up local “otherness,” diminishing the county’s old sense of cultural and ethnic diversity.⁸²³ Almost everyone is better off financially, and overt racism is not tolerated by mainstream society. Marrying across ethnic and racial lines, which once would have required fleeing to the relative safety of Austin or New York City, is commonplace.

Much of this change toward the relative ethnic and cultural simplicity of suburbia is bound up with the loss of farming and ranching as viable ways to make a living. Until the advent of the dams and the interstate, Williamson County was a bastion of the small family farm, personified by the Czech and German farmers on the Black Waxy. In 1961, Williamson County counted at least thirteen hundred families who owned and worked exclusively on

⁸²³U.S. Census, 1980-2000.

farms.⁸²⁴ In 1974, of Williamson County's 722,560 acres, 476,890 were "under cultivation" — that is, devoted to row crop farming, almost all on the east side of the county. The rest was "waste" land, good for goats, sheep and cattle. That same year, some thirty-five thousand acres of "waste" acreage was platted for subdivisions. All of that was in west Williamson County.⁸²⁵ In the year 2001, subdivisions and cities covered a third of the county, mostly in the southwestern section between Round Rock, Cedar Park, Leander, and Georgetown. Farmers grew row crops on 160,000 acres, producing a gross agricultural income of \$67 million.⁸²⁶

But unlike the days before the dams and the interstate, the farmers of the new millennium do not farm full time. They work one or two other jobs to make ends meet. Once, their \$67 million gross income would have provided the bulk of Williamson County's produced annual wealth. But in 2001, compared to the \$1.75 billion county industries produced through other means, it was a pittance. And, according to Ronnie Leps, the county's most astute agricultural observer, there is little hope for the future. "I

⁸²⁴Williamson County Farm Bureau, Georgetown. This was not the *total* number of county farm families, just those who belonged to the Bureau. This was down from 3,954 farms on 651,969 acres in 1940. See Census of Agriculture, 1940 Characteristics of the Population.

⁸²⁵Williamson County County Clerk's Office, 1974 plat maps, Georgetown

⁸²⁶Telephone interview: Ronnie Leps, Feb. 20, 2002, Georgetown. Leps has been the county's chief agricultural extension agent for nearly twenty years. The vagaries of weather cause farm income to see-saw wildly: for example from \$75 million in 1999, for example, to \$52 million in 2000.

don't care if you live in Granger or Fredericksburg, Texas, production farming is a hell of a way to make a living," he said. "It's just not there."

None of them in row crop production are making any money. I'm about as frustrated with production agriculture as I've ever been. When I hear these politicians talk about the sanctity of the family farm, I just want to puke. The government has done nothing but screw things up. It may be that the best thing that could happen would be if these people went and got another job. And I *love* row production!⁸²⁷

By 2002, the reservoirs created by Granger and North Fork dams (which every professional planner and engineer in Texas and Washington thought could never be utilized by Williamson County alone) could not supply the county, let alone any place else. For the moment, Round Rock and Georgetown were taking all the water they could out of Lake Georgetown. Liberty Hill, Cedar Park, Florence, Granger, Hutto and Thrall expected shortfalls by 2020.⁸²⁸ Leander already had run out of water, so in

⁸²⁷Leps, *ibid.*

⁸²⁸Brazos G Regional Water Plan, HDR Engineering, July 2000, Table 4-72, 4-155, Brazos G Regional Water Planning Group, Waco; "Water for Texas," Vol. II, 3-150, 3-155, Aug. 1997, Texas Water Development Board, Austin; Alan Lindsey, "Alliance works on water plan for Williamson," Georgetown *Sunday Sun*, Dec. 17, 2000, A-1

1998, its supplier, the Brazos River Authority, and the Lower Colorado River Authority had agreed it could cross the water basin divide and pump water from Lake Travis.⁸²⁹ Much of West Williamson County purchased its water supply from Chisholm Trail Water Supply Corporation, which, along with Georgetown and Round Rock, was counting on a \$36.5 million pipeline from Stillhouse Hollow Reservoir to Lake Georgetown that was supposed to solve Williamson County's water problems for twenty years. After that, nobody knew what to expect. Projections showed the county's water demand outstripping supply by 2020, at which time the equivalent of another Lake Georgetown would be needed. By 2050, projections showed the county needing at least two more Granger Lakes, or four Lake Georgetowns.⁸³⁰

Nobody knew where the water might come from. Owen Sherrill's old proposed dam on the South Fork of the San Gabriel River had been declared dead because its estimated cost was prohibitive, compared to the amount of water it would provide. Were it revived, a coalition of environmentalists defending the county's last stretch of natural river and million-dollar home owners would undoubtedly fight it. The Brazos River Authority proposed to build a reservoir in west Milam County, which, irony of ironies, would bury the very farm land that Granger Dam was built to protect, but opposition from Milam was vociferous, and

⁸²⁹Erin J. Walter, "Leander will give away water rights," Austin *American-Statesman*, Jan. 4, 2001, B-2

⁸³⁰Brazos G Region Water Plan, 4-151-4-155, *ibid.*

BRA officials expressed doubts that the project would ever be built.⁸³¹ The most promising approaches eyed utilizing existing water supplies better by piping them where they are needed. Thus, sinking wells into the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer in Lee County and pumping the water to Williamson County; transferring water from the Colorado basin to the Brazos basin, as was already being done in Leander; and building more pipelines, such as the one funneling water from Lake Stillhouse Hollow to Lake Georgetown, were solutions that looked better all the time. Water conservation got scant attention.⁸³²

The Stillhouse pipeline, twenty-eight miles long, was supposed to have started transporting water in late 2001 to Georgetown, Round Rock, and Chisholm Trail Water Supply. In December 2001, Brazos River Authority workers discovered that at least 6.5 miles of the pipeline's joints were crushed. A BRA spokesperson said that "vandals" apparently had stuffed bolts, planks and a bag of concrete mix into the pipeline before the intake pump was installed. When the pump was switched on, the objects were sucked through the works, blowing its joints to rubble. The joints would have to be excavated and replaced, a job

⁸³¹Michelle M. Martinez, "Williamson reservoir plan draws opposition," *Austin American-Statesman*, Aug. 29, 2000; B-1; Martinez, "Fighting to keep above water," *American-Statesman*, Dec. 28, 2000; Interview: Horace Grace, Aug. 7, 2000, Georgetown

⁸³²Alan Lindsey, "Water agreement will meet needs for next 20 years," *Williamson County Sun*, Aug. 23, 2000; Lindsey, "G'town should expand water intake . . ." *Sun*, Sept. 20, 2000; Lindsay, "Alliance works on water plan . . ." *ibid.*

requiring at least a year. Meanwhile, Round Rock and Chisholm Trail would be pinched for water, and their customers would pay higher rates. Chisholm Trail faced a grim summer, with four subdivisions being developed within the water district, to which water could not be supplied at the previously contracted rate. Lawsuits were expected to fly in all directions.⁸³³

Adventurous souls still canoed the San Gabriel River, as before the dams, though white-water canoeing was gone. But often, as Wilson Fox had insisted, kayaks and canoes had to be portaged on the backs of paddlers, as the Brazos River Authority allowed a bare trickle — the river’s “low-flow average — to be released from North Fork Dam west of Georgetown.⁸³⁴ This meant the river didn’t dry up altogether during the summer, as it sometimes had before the dams were built, but the brief bursts of boiling river after rainfalls that once had delighted canoeists and tube floaters were eliminated. During “low-flow” months, few county residents would swim or eat fish from the river. Persistent complaints about Georgetown’s water treatment plant leaking

⁸³³Jeff Dorsch, “36 million water pipeline springs a big leak,” Williamson County *Sun*, Feb. 6, 2002; Tony Plohetsky, “Lake Stillhouse pipeline leaking, must be repaired,” Austin *American-Statesman*, Feb. 12, 2002

⁸³⁴The Corps of Engineers operated the dams under the control of the Brazos River Authority, which “owned” the water on behalf of the State of Texas. The BRA negotiated contracts with potential water customers and controlled the release of water from all of its dams, unless a flood threatened, at which point the Corps took over.

sewage had never been verified by state inspectors, but people remained wary.⁸³⁵

North Fork Dam affected the San Gabriel's flood plain in another surprising way. Completely unexpectedly, it killed hundreds of ancient cottonwoods, cypress, pecan, and burr oak trees clumped along the river's "bottom" lands in east Williamson County. Here is how it happened. When heavy rains threatened to flood downstream waterways, the Corps would close North Fork Dam above Georgetown, causing the lake to rise. The point was to avoid adding to the river's swollen downstream flow, where its tributaries were dumping floodwaters. When the flood threat subsided, the Corps would release great volumes of water from the swollen lake, causing the river to run briskly for days. It was like squirting a hose at a pile of soft dirt: East Williamson County's rich Black Waxy soil melted under the water's scouring action, fell into the river, and took trees with it. Before the dams, seasonal floods covered the "bottom" lands with a thin layer of silt, adding to the fertility of the black belt, but the water subsided quickly and gently, causing little erosion.

Granger Lake was not popular with fishermen or lake lovers. Its broad surface, spread across the flat Black Waxy and exposed to wind, easily turned to a high chop. The lake had an

⁸³⁵At the time of this writing, Georgetown's Dove Springs treatment plant was once again being inspected by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Council. Carter Nelson, "State agency reviewing Dove Springs treatment plant," Feb. 28, 2002, *Austin American-Statesman*

unfortunate habit of drowning boaters caught in wind storms.⁸³⁶ Henry Fox had predicted it would become a giant mud hole. As it reached the twenty-year mark, it was silting up fast. Many doubted it would last fifty years.

In 1972, Bobby Stanton marketed Williamson County's first big subdivision west of Interstate 35 by promising a quick, pleasant ride from Georgetown to Austin. In its maiden years, driving on I-35 was like taking a Sunday afternoon drive in the country. Stanton's vision paid off. But now, he confesses, "I don't know whether it's a vision or a nightmare."⁸³⁷ Traffic has become unbearable. In the mid-1990's, Governor Ann Richards declared Williamson County's portion of I-35 a "disaster zone." The stretch of highway from South Austin through Williamson County is Texas's most congested. At the Colorado River bridge in Austin, where in 1959 an average volume of 6,287 vehicles per day passed by, today's average traffic count is 201,000 vehicles. Heading north toward Williamson County, traffic volume peaks at 220,000 vehicles per day at State Highway 183. At the Williamson County line, I-35 shuttles 168,000 vehicles per day. At Farm to

⁸³⁶Interview: Dan Thomison, Oct. 4, 2000, Granger Lake

⁸³⁷Stanton, *ibid.*

Market 1325 in Round Rock, where people leave the interstate to reach La Frontera and Dell Computer, the average daily flow is 154,000. Eighty-six thousand vehicles a day come through Georgetown. By the time a driver reaches Jarrell, traffic volume has dropped to forty-nine thousand vehicles per day.⁸³⁸ The average speed from Georgetown to Austin is forty-five miles per hour, slower than before the interstate was built.⁸³⁹

No one knows how bad traffic will get before it frightens industrial and residential prospects away, but fear of that prospect is driving a county-wide effort to create a “virtual” interstate, State Highway 130. The highway, which may become a toll road, would peel off I-35 at Georgetown’s northernmost limits, loop east of “Old Georgetown,” Round Rock, and Austin, rejoining Interstate 35 south of Seguin. It would cut through numerous Blackland Prairie farms, passing less than a football field’s length from several developed neighborhoods.

The road is supposed to draw off I-35’s truck traffic, which jumped 14.5 percent in the year after the North American Free Trade Amendment (NAFTA) was enacted and Mexican trucks started plying U.S. highways.⁸⁴⁰ It also should appeal to people driving from Dallas, say, to San Antonio, and to Williamson County commuters — if they can reach it. Many of the highway’s

⁸³⁸Interview: John Hurt, Jan. 24, 2002, Austin

⁸³⁹Michelle M. Martinez, “The roads test,” Oct. 12, 2000, *Austin American-Statesman*.

⁸⁴⁰O’Brien, *ibid.* Toll roads, however, are often shunned by truckers.

most influential boosters project it will become an alternative commuter option to I-35. The problem is, most people in Round Rock and Georgetown live west of I-35. Getting to SH 130 would require them to drive east through their cities before reaching the highway. The probable crush on city traffic is unimaginable. Projected cost of the ninety-one mile highway is one to one-and-a-half billion dollars.⁸⁴¹

The road is passionately opposed by farmers and home owners near its path, but it appears SH 130 will be built. The governments of Williamson County, Round Rock and Georgetown have fought hard for it. Dell Computer's multi-billion dollar investment in Round Rock would benefit from it.⁸⁴² In November 2000, county residents approved three hundred and fifty million dollars worth of bonds to help build SH 130, along with eight other projects.

But one suspects that the most compelling underlying reason that so many local government officials support SH 130 is that it would open up new territory for industrial and residential economic development. "It's virgin territory," enthused Georgetown Mayor Leo Wood. "The 130 highway would give us the opportunity to do some tremendous land planning. It would

⁸⁴¹Kelly Daniel, "Buckle Up: Texas 130 is finally a go," *Austin American-Statesman*; Interview: Quevarra Moten, Texas Department of Transportation, Feb. 25, 2002, Austin

⁸⁴²Dell Computer Properties, 2001 Certified Values, Williamson County Appraisal District, Georgetown

allow us to make Georgetown what we want it to be.”⁸⁴³ State Representative Mike Krusee said it more plainly. “SH 130 will be an engine for growth.”⁸⁴⁴

Williamson County needs more east-west roads, particularly along its border with Travis County, where most of its population lives. Moses and Tom Kouri figured that would be the case when they bought Ernest Anderson’s dairy farm at U.S. Highway 81/I-35 and FM 1325 in 1964. It was the perfect place to connect with any conceivable new artery between Austin and Round Rock. Now that artery is being built. It will sweep along FM 1325’s path in front of the Kouri investment. When completed in 2006, State Highway 45 will be sixteen miles long and will connect the future SH 130 with I-35 and Ranch to Market 620 in west Williamson. Estimated cost: seven hundred million dollars.⁸⁴⁵ It will swoop past Dell Computer, giving the company’s employees the option to take one of two north-south expressways. When completed, with all other proposed county and state projects, it will form part of a huge Williamson County loop, starting northeast of Georgetown where SH 130 takes off from I-35, continuing south almost to Travis County, joining SH 45, which heads west to RM 620. Finally, after a blank segment is filled in, the loop continues on

⁸⁴³Interview: Leo Wood, June 30, 1998, Georgetown

⁸⁴⁴Interview: Mike Krusee, June, 1999, Austin

⁸⁴⁵The figure comes from the Round Rock Planning Department, courtesy of Nancy Yawn, Round Rock’s public affairs representative.

Parmer Lane north to FM 3405, at Lake Georgetown's western tip — just west of Del Webb Sun City.⁸⁴⁶

“We worked on State Highway 45 for years,” said Tom Kouri, speaking of his efforts to prod the Texas Highway Department to build the highway. Starting in the early 1980's, the Kouri team lobbied persistently, but little progress was made. “I was like a gnat on an elephant,” Kouri said. “But finally, when we got Dell behind it, and got the Bass brothers behind it, and Robinson behind it — the *big* boys — we got the highway.”⁸⁴⁷

In 1998, two years after Dell moved across the interstate and built its enormous complex, Tom Kouri sold the dairy farm that his brother Moses had insisted on buying, no matter the price.⁸⁴⁸ Kouri held the land for thirty-four years.

I wanted first class, like the Arboretum.⁸⁴⁹ I wanted it to be an asset to the City of Round Rock. Round Rock needs something to take it from a small town to a fine city. You know that Wal-Mart across the street? I could have had that deal. They came to me first. But I didn't want it. It's just a bunch of junk. That's what you do in a small town; you patch it here and junk it up there. I wanted to do something different.

⁸⁴⁶Martinez, Oct. 12, 2000, *ibid.*

⁸⁴⁷Kouri, *ibid.*

⁸⁴⁸Moses Kouri died in 1974.

⁸⁴⁹The Arboretum is Austin's classiest large retail development, largely because the developers worked around the dense natural growth of oak trees. The scale is relatively small, compared to most mall-type developments. High-end retailers like Saks Fifth Avenue, Banana Republic, and Coach are located there.

The Bass brothers of Fort Worth sent emissaries.⁸⁵⁰ How about an Arboretum-style development? they asked. They promised a full-service, first-class hotel (not available elsewhere in Williamson County). They promised to plant “a forest of trees.”⁸⁵¹ Tom Kouri made the deal. On his old pastures rose a huge complex, too massive and solid to begin to compare to the Arboretum’s airy bower of trees in Northwest Austin, rose an eight-story Marriott Hotel, a Barnes and Noble, and a Starbucks. It was called La Frontera. Unfortunately, it looks more like the development across the interstate — a sea of concrete and massive structures — than the elegant retail hub Kouri envisioned. Perhaps it will improve when the “forest of trees” grows. As the new century dawned, Tom Kouri’s highway was being built, right out front. If La Frontera could smile, it would. In its first year of activity, the property value of Ernest Anderson’s old dairy farm was one hundred and five million dollars.⁸⁵² That didn’t even begin to count retail sales.

It is worth restating the cold fact that in Williamson County, as in suburbs across the American South and Southwest, the goals

⁸⁵⁰Don Martin and Bill Smalling of Austin made the approach. Ed Bass and several of his brothers are known in Texas for investing lavishly in downtown Fort Worth, which they resurrected from the grave, turning it into one of the livliest, most attractive central business districts in Texas. The property value does not include the tax dollars to Round Rock from sales and hotel taxes.

⁸⁵¹Kouri, *ibid.*

⁸⁵²La Frontera is made up of Tom Kouri’s 110 acres and another 87 acres the Basses acquired from other owners. Businesses there include Frost National Bank and Lowe’s Home Center, dozens of national chain stores, and multi-family housing.

espoused by the Federal government as rationales for building enormously expensive road and river projects were undermined by unforeseen consequences brought about by the projects themselves. Originally, the U.S. Corps of Engineers sought a flood control dam in Williamson County so that elite regional economic producers — downstream rice farmers and Dow Chemical — could safely and reliably operate their businesses. That the Corps' proposed dam on the San Gabriel would gouge out the heart of Williamson County's agricultural environment was unfortunate, but the engineers rationalized, along with their backers in Congress, that the "greater good" pointed downstream.

But because local opposition blocked funding, the Corps had to add new "rationales" and drastically change their project, resulting in two dams that could protect against an average fifty-year flood, not a hundred-year one. Given a 1921 weather scenario, Williamson County's dams would not stop the San Gabriel from going on another rampage, though the dams would reduce the river's brute force. But the Georgetown dam encouraged people to build downstream, as is often the case with flood control dams. Property damage from a hundred-year flood in 2021 would dwarf damage in 1921.⁸⁵³ Meanwhile, Williamson

⁸⁵³Deaths would almost certainly be fewer, unless a colossal dam failure occurred, owing to early warning systems developed since 1921. A study on how the Colorado River dams would bear up under a 100-year flood found disturbing results. See Chuck Lidell, "LCRA model shows devastation Central Texas would face in flood," *Austin American-Statesman*, Aug. 23, 2001.

County's most successful farmers — who desperately *wanted* protection from floods — were permanently flooded, driven from their homes and livelihoods by the nation's elite engineering force, the Army Corps.

Compounding east Williamson County's woes was the fact that Lake Georgetown's water and Interstate 35 vastly increased the ability of cities and entrepreneurs to grow money in west Williamson County. The effect was seismic. When the engineers finished their projects, Williamson County's land contours remained stable. But everything else changed. Agriculture, the county's bedrock, was swept aside and never recovered. It was as if the hand that, seventy million years earlier, tore a seam through the county and tipped the richest soil in North America into east Williamson County, had reversed the gesture. The flow of possibility turned and headed west.



Figure 54: Interstate 35 not yet open at Round Rock, which lies in the background. Note how I-35 cut through part of residential Round Rock. Below the airplane, but not visible, is the FM 1325 exchange.



Figure 55: Same view today, with FM 1325 crossing in foreground. La Frontera sits at the northwestern corner of I-35 and FM 1325.

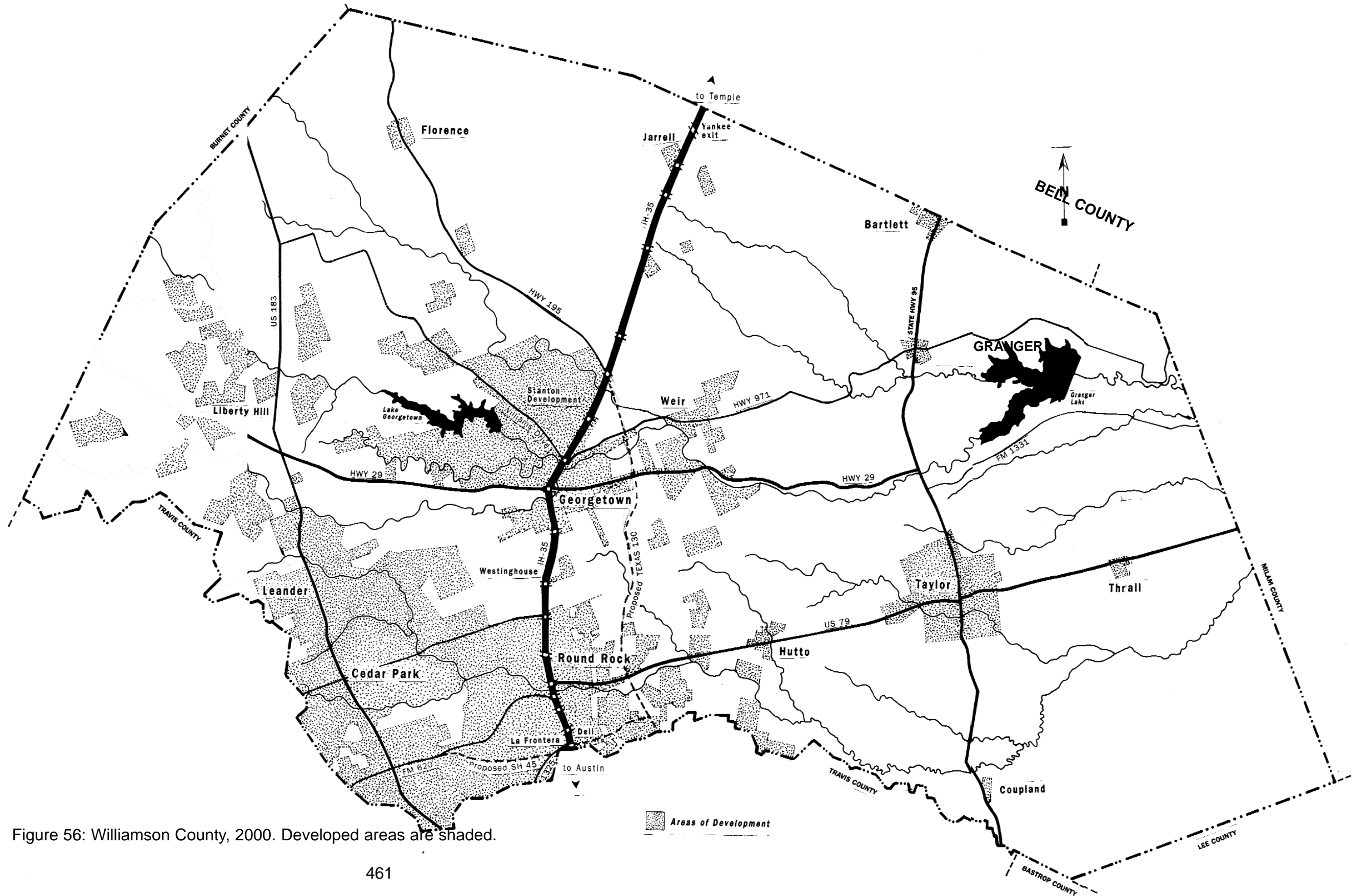


Figure 56: Williamson County, 2000. Developed areas are shaded.

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After completing her undergraduate work, she worked as a journalist at the New York Daily News, New York Trib, Raleigh News & Observer, Butner-Creedmoor (North Carolina) News, and Williamson County Sun and Sunday Sun (Georgetown, Texas), which she owns. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, New York Times Magazine, Scholastic, Atlanta Constitution, New York News Magazine, Washington Post Magazine, and Texas Monthly. Newspapers she edited have won a number of awards, including the Headliner Award for best Texas community newspaper; Texas Press Association Sweepstakes for best newspaper eight out of ten years 1985-1995; and North Carolina Press Association Sweepstakes Award.

She married Clark Thurmond January 2, 1983. They have one daughter, Katherine Alicia Thurmond, born March 11, 1990. They live at 1002 Walnut Street, Georgetown, Texas 78626.

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