

Fragile waterway is monitored

Lawyer keeps an eye on maze of drainage pipes, politics

Geologists call it a typical Hill Country creek, but to Austinites, Barton Creek represents something special and all that is right with the city. With development creeping to its edges, water quality in the creek is in danger. This is the 18th in a series of articles that look at the present, past and future life along the creek, and the pollution that threatens it.

By **PETE SZILAGYI**

American-Statesman Staff

Although the temperature outdoors was in the upper 90s, it was cool, damp and crypt-like in the 12-by-4-foot concrete chamber that's part of the Barton Creek Square runoff filtration system.

A beam of sunlight from an overhead ventilator flickered across Joe Riddell's arms as he described how the filters work, or more specifically, how he thinks they don't work.

From time to time, Riddell and other members of the Zilker Park Posse crawl up 4-foot drainage pipes into the bowels of the three filters to see if they seem to be performing their function of filtering rain runoff from the mall's parking lot before it flows into Barton Creek. The mall has become a symbol to environmentalists of what they consider to be monumentally poor urban planning in a delicate natural area.

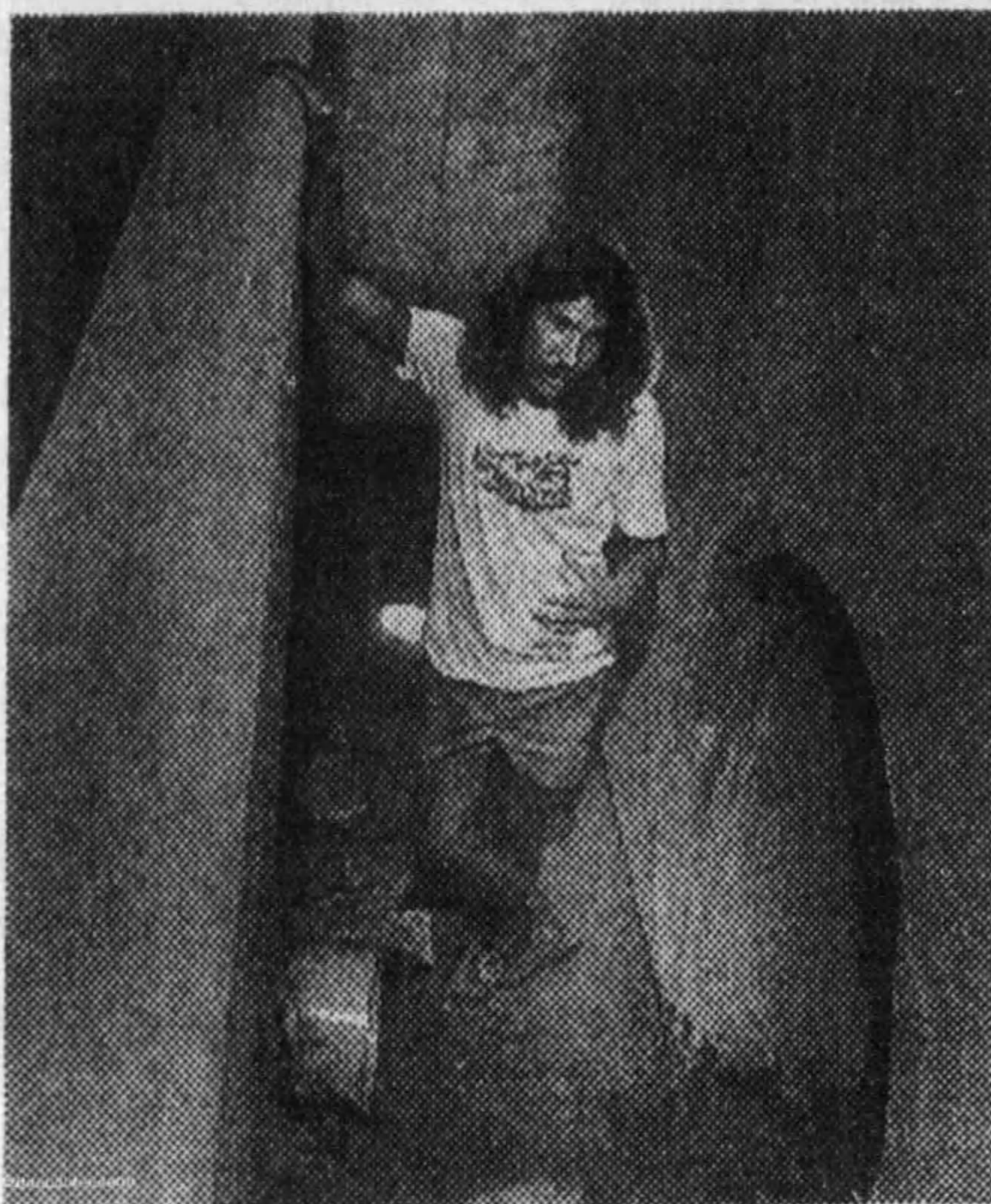
Crawling through muddy, slimy pipes is no fun, and there is an element of danger involved in rainy weather, but the task is part of Riddell's effort to keep Barton Creek clean and usable in the face of urban growth in its watershed.

Riddell, 35, is a fixture at the Austin City Council and commission meetings when Barton Creek, Barton Springs and the Edwards Aquifer are under discussion.

A lawyer with no established practice, Riddell said his infatuation with Barton Creek began in 1973 after he tube floated the creek with a friend and "it blew my mind."

"I discovered the magic of it."

On a subsequent trip he noticed a bulldozer in the creek bed and decided, "If the magic is still going to be there, it's time to do something."



Staff Photo by David Kennedy

Joe Riddell crawls through drainage pipes to monitor runoff.

"In March 1974 the council passed a creek ordinance that was vaguely written," he said. "I had some time on my hands so I monitored it to see how it was being interpreted. Through the process, I became aware of what was happening to the creek."

Riddell said his efforts paid off when he discovered a developer installing a sewer line in the creek bed without the proper permit. He later was named to the city's environmental board. Riddell currently is a board member of both the Zilker Park Posse, the most strident environmental group in Austin, and the larger Save Barton Creek Association.

Through frequent trips to the creek to swim and tube float, Riddell has found the best swimming holes and has identified the best stretches for floating and canoeing. He says he has walked or tube floated two-thirds of the creek's 50 miles.

By videotaping the prime public use areas, he hopes to get more people to use the creek so there will be more support for fights with politicians or developers over potentially damaging projects.

"The bottom line of where I try to be active is in preventing irreparable harm."



**Barton Creek:
its life and spirit**

The pollution of an aquifer takes a long time to clean up. It's unfair as well as being undesirable," he said. "If we've already crapped it out, future generations don't get the choice of having it and they have a right to clean water, too."

Riddell claims no one, himself included, knows how to keep urbanization from ruining the creek and aquifer. He suggests a moratorium on building while existing developments are used as a laboratory to test devices that would filter rain runoff headed for the creek and aquifer.

Although the City Council is generally perceived as liberal, Riddell said he is disappointed with them.

"They really haven't taken the bull by the horns," he said. "They're more liberal from a social standpoint than from a growth or environmental standpoint."

Councilman Ron Mullen, not one of the liberals, said he considers Riddell "an extremist, but he still has ideas we need to consider. He has been a good conscience for Austin."

Mullen said Riddell and others don't look at the reality of "what things cost" when they propose ordinances and projects to protect the creek.

"Sometimes you have to make a lot of noise to make people hear you," Riddell said. "I'm idealistic and have a hard time compromising, but I've tried very hard to be reasonable."

"In the end, public education and awareness will win out," he said.

Next: Barton Springs.