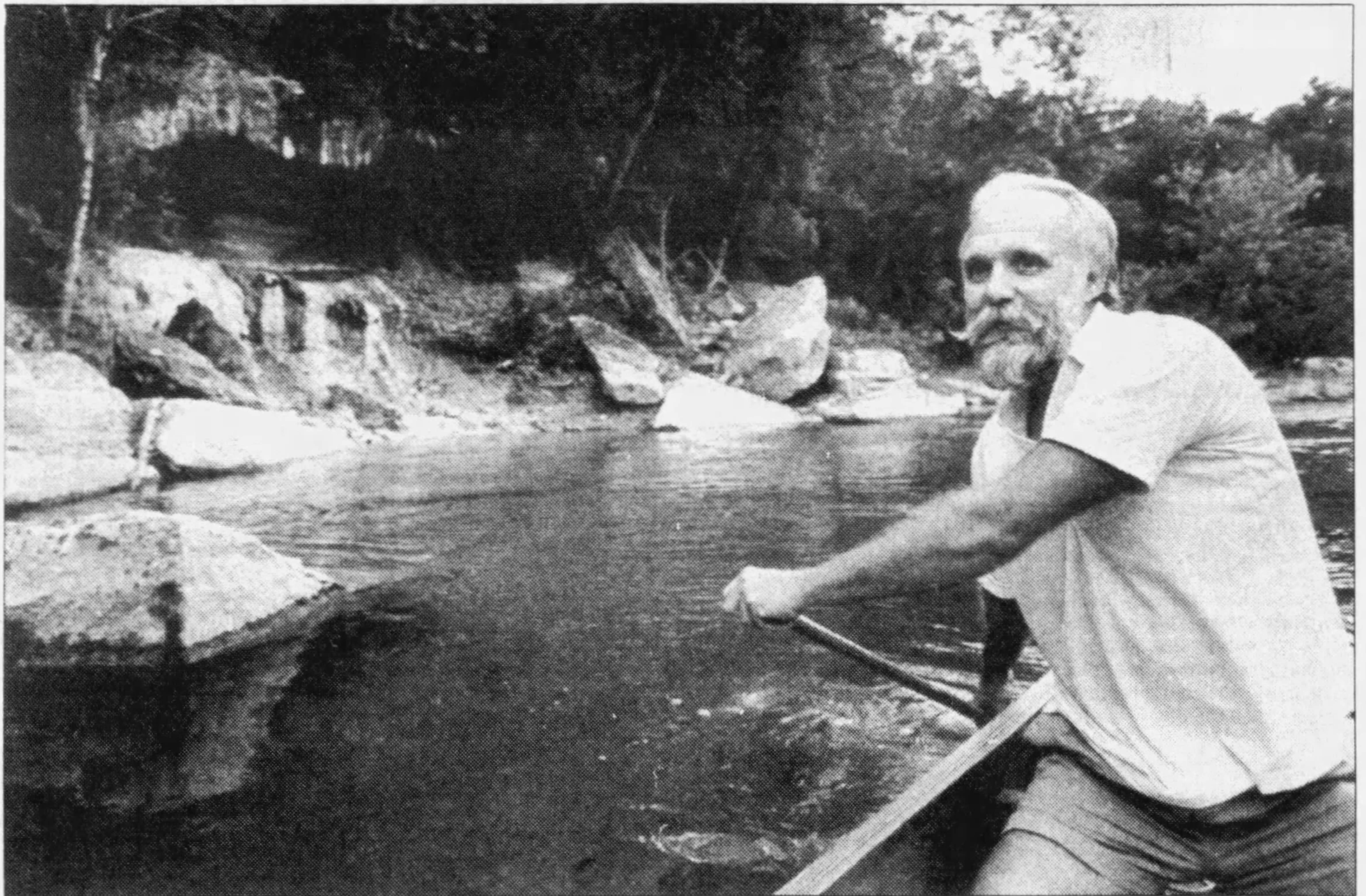


Barton's rural roots



Wayne Gronquist paddles near one of many tributaries and small springs feeding Barton Creek. He began exploring the creek in 1974.

Secret waterfalls and grottos grace stream flowing into city

Story by Pete Szilagyi
Photos by David Kennedy

American-Statesman Staff

Seated in a canoe on Barton Creek, with a hawk soaring above and a bass gliding below, one can't help but marvel that such solitude is so close to the drum of the city.

For many, Barton is a reminder of creeks from the summers of their youth, yet it needs no embellishment from a dimming memory. The pools are clear and deep, harboring fish, turtles, frogs, crawfish and snakes.

There are secret waterfalls and caves, with flat rocks aplenty for diving platforms.

During some years, Barton Creek is reduced to a trickle by mid-July. But fed by the frequent rains recently, it has performed like a superstar so far this summer as tubers, canoeists, kayakers, swimmers and fishermen have discovered and rediscovered this antidote to hot, humid afternoons.

Scenic views have attracted considerable development to Barton Creek during the past decade, and a freeway has been built over it. Still, the water in the urbanized stretch of Barton Creek generally remains clean enough for swimming, though the pools seem muddier than those upstream and tests show some increases in gasoline, oil and fertilizer runoff el-

ements. The views from the creek now include some condominiums, apartments and other structures, and an increase in litter, but the character of the creek and its valley remains essentially unchanged.

Among the most frequent users of this waterway are Wayne Gronquist and Joe Riddell, who could be described as the Lewis and Clark of the creek. They are among the founders of the Save Barton Creek Association and the Zilker Park Posse, which had the preservation of Barton Springs — inextricably linked geologically and hydraulically with Barton Creek — as a major goal.

Gronquist, Riddell and several others, including a reporter and photographer, recently canoed and kayaked the creek from two miles above the Texas 71 bridge over Barton Creek to the crossing at Lost Creek Boulevard. As the crow flies, the distance is 5½ miles. The creek, however, is in no hurry. It uses 15½ miles, and several challenging rapids are generated by the 130-foot elevation drop.

Gronquist and Riddell, both lawyers, and others have lobbied for ordinances to restrict

development in an effort to keep the water in Barton Creek and Barton Springs pure. The laws have made Barton Creek, called Spring Creek by early settlers to the area, the most protected body of water in Texas, but activists think the creek is such an essential part of Austin's soul that it deserves even more stringent protection.

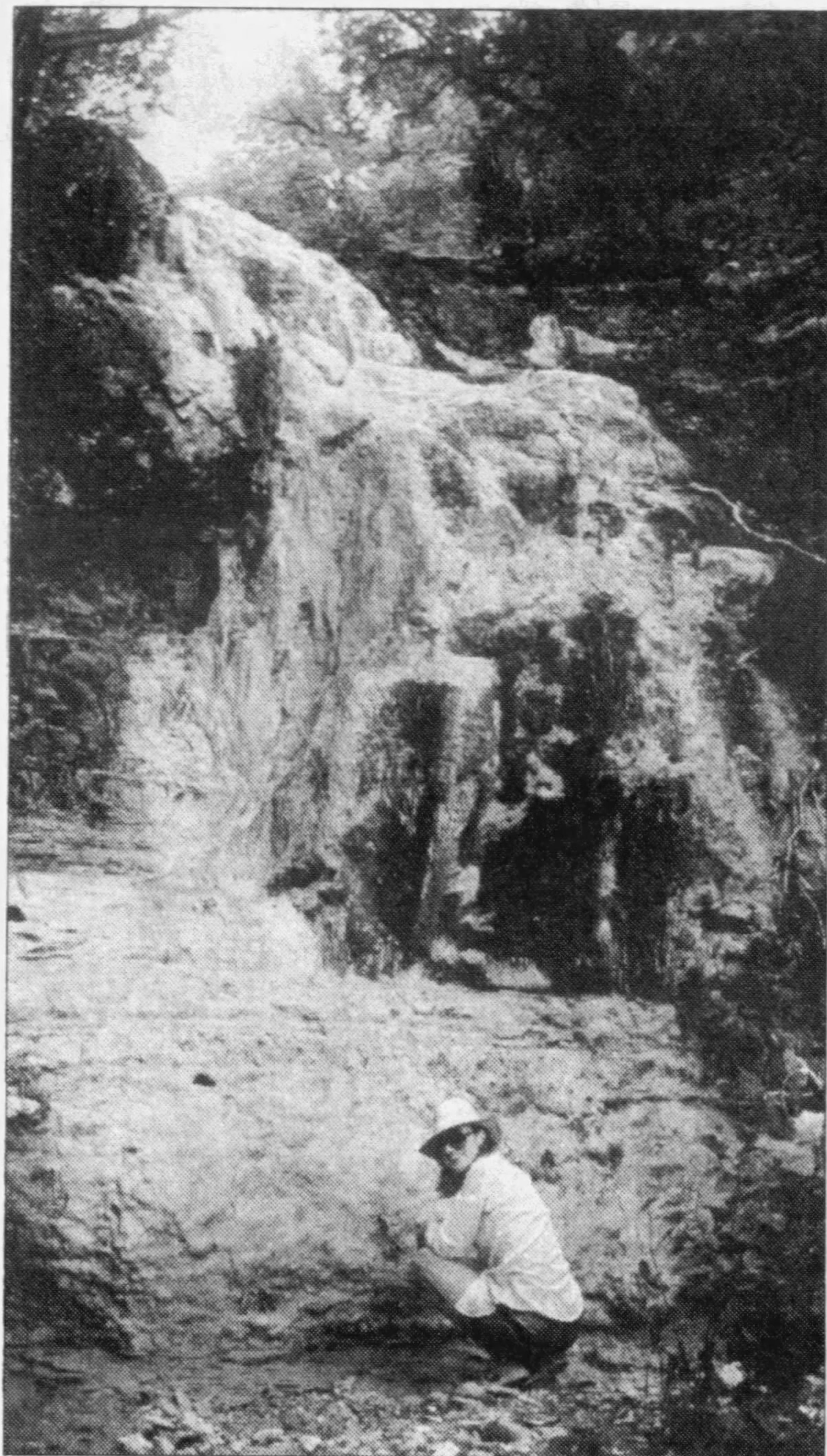
"Barton Creek is an asset we have now. People can enjoy it. The price of preserving it is to take care of it," Riddell said.

Together or separately, Gronquist and Riddell have tubed or canoed Barton Creek hundreds of times since the early 1970s. On one four-day trip, they canoed the creek from near Dripping Springs nearly to Lost Creek.

The canoe trip began on undeveloped acreage that Gronquist owns in a partnership with several other investors. The tract itself, downstream from writer J. Frank Dobie's creekside Paisano Ranch, is a microcosm of the build-no-build dispute over much of the Barton Creek watershed.

Some partners, Gronquist said, want to develop the land for maximum economic benefit. Others, like himself, would prefer to see it

See Barton Creek, B6



Jan Justice pauses at a grottolike formation caused by a tributary.

quist recalls stopping along the creek once to camp for the night only to be accosted by a shotgun-wielding rancher.

The canoeists periodically encountered swimmers who had gained access because they were friends of creekside landowners. Others, who said they came down to the creek on a dirt road off Bee Cave Road, admitted that they had trespassed to get to the creek.

The major public accesses to Barton Creek are at RR 12, which is north of Dripping Springs, Fitzhugh Road, Texas 71, Lost Creek Boulevard, and the few points in the city's Barton Creek greenbelt, which runs from where the creek borders the Woods of Westlake subdivision to Town Lake.

Because canoes are relatively silent, wildlife in and around the creek was easily observed. Turtles dropped off rocks and branches as the canoes approached, and pan-size largemouth bass veered toward the shelter of a bank, apparently to avoid the shadow of the canoe on the rocky bottom below. Once in a while, the dark shape of a large catfish scouting the bottom was visible.

Bird life was abundant, with the distinctive call of the canyon wren audible at nearly every bend in the creek. Other species encountered were cliff swallows, belted kingfishers, great blue herons, Louisiana herons, and numerous biting flies and mosquitoes.

The water was still slightly murky from a surprise thunderstorm two days earlier, but the visibility underwater was still quite good in many of the pools. Two days later, when the sediment had fully settled, the creek had the clar-

flow, which is routed through a viaduct under Barton Springs Pool so flood debris are less likely to foul the pool water. The Green Treatment Plant sends Barton water throughout the central city.

Gronquist feels strongly that Barton Creek's water quality must be preserved because it provides some city drinking water and fuels one of the city's primary tourist attraction, Barton Springs.

Gronquist and Riddell are members of the city's Friends of the Aquifer Task Force, which will report to the City Council this year. One of their recommendations, Gronquist said, will be to bottle and sell Barton Springs water as premium drinking water.

"The water coming down the creek from all those springs, and the water coming out of those springs, is, by and large, pure drinking water. When people float in it, they couldn't have a purer recreational stream, at least one that's readily accessible," Gronquist said.

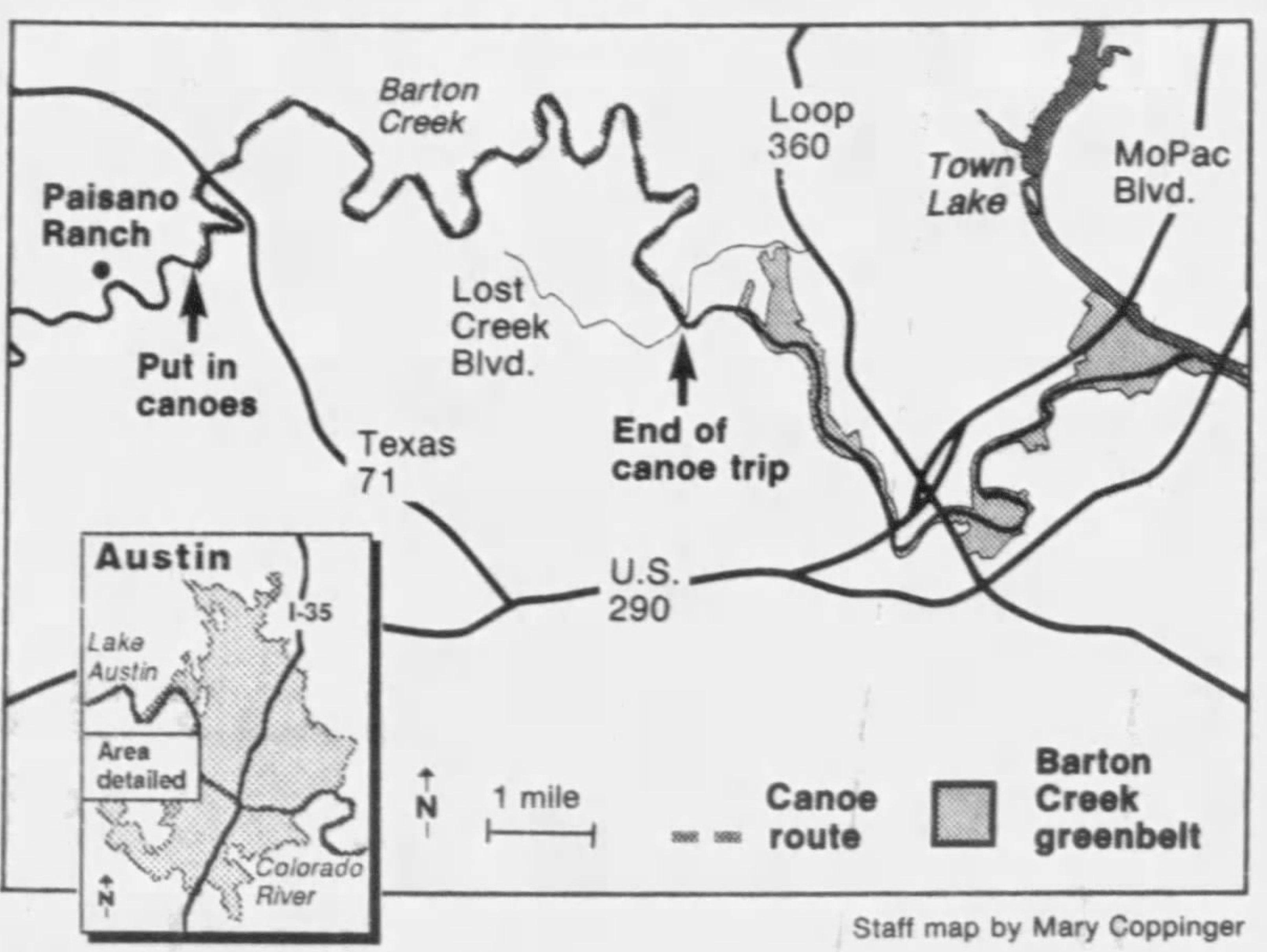
He contends the reason the water remains clear despite the city's growth is that most development has occurred downstream from the primary recharge area. "The only thing that has saved us is that development hasn't gotten very far out," Gronquist said.

Among the proposed upstream developments that concerns him is the 825-acre Gill Ranch, which adjoins Gronquist's own land west of Texas 71. Owners of the ranch will appear before the City Council within a few weeks to ask for a variance from the Comprehensive Watershed Ordinance so that higher density housing can be built.

How to approach such developments poses a dilemma for Gronquist, since protecting the water quality in a complex watershed such as Barton Creek's is an inexact science. "We just don't know whether we have done enough" in lobbying for increasing strict regulations, he said.

In a perfect world, as viewed by Gronquist, all the undeveloped land in critical areas near the creek would be designated as nature preserves for perpetuity. "If it is developed very much," he said, "it will suffer the same fate as Shoal Creek and Bull Creek (unfit for recreational use.) We'll ruin the asset."

Every mile or two, a tributary



Staff map by Mary Coppinger

'Barton Creek is an asset we have now, people can enjoy it. The price of preserving it is to take care of it.'

Environmental activist Joe Riddell

joins Barton Creek. Some are major streams, such as Little Barton Creek, which intersects the creek just above the Texas 71 bridge, but most are relatively small and emanate from a spring or series of springs.

Hundreds of small springs also erupt from the creek bank and bed, cumulatively providing the entire volume of Barton Creek in dry weather.

The canoe flotilla stopped at the mouth of what appeared to be a non-descript tributary and, after a short hike, found a cool, serene, fern-lined canyon. In geological vernacular, it was probably a shelter cave, essentially a small version of Hamilton Pool or Westcave Preserve.

A spring trickled from the edge of a cliff and cascaded about 25 yards through a series of clear pools to become part of Barton Creek. If this remarkable geological feature had occurred, for example, in Zilker Park, it would be one of the most photographed attractions in Austin.

As it is, the sinkhole will someday be part of someone's back yard. A surveyor's stake, which was marked "lot corner," had been

pounded into the middle of the grotto. This was part of somebody's building lot, apparently in the Estates at Barton Creek subdivision, from what the canoeists could determine.

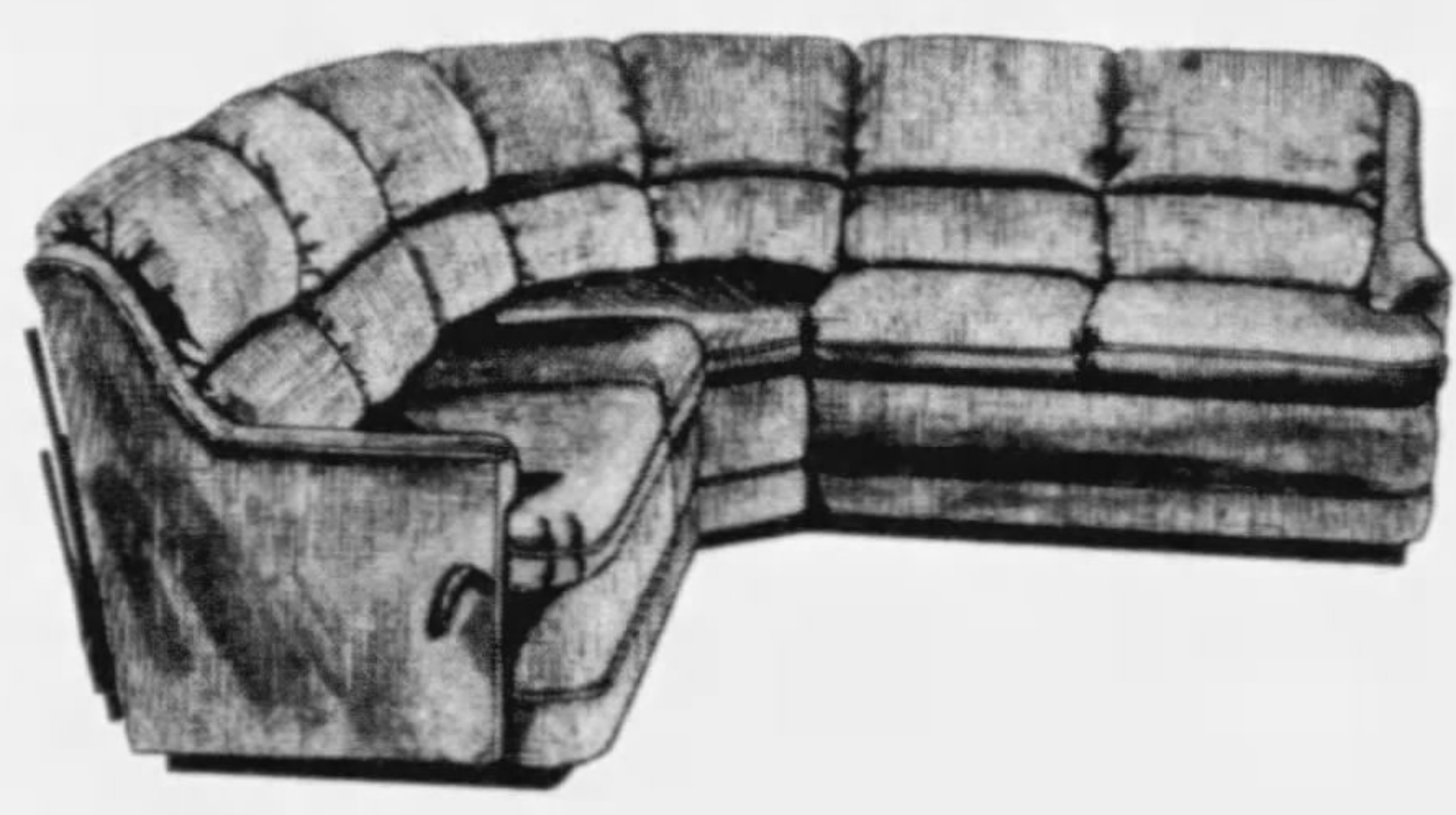
Upstream, few points of reference exist. Downstream, as the city approaches and mammoth new homes begin to appear on the cliffs above, they become numerous — a microwave tower on the hill nearby, the new bridge over the creek at Barton Creek Drive and, finally, Lost Creek Country Club, indicating the final stretch of the canoe trip.

By then it was nearly 9 p.m., dusk was leaving and darkness was rapidly approaching. The canoeists spoke less and paddled harder to reach the trip's end, Lost Creek Boulevard, while there was still some light.

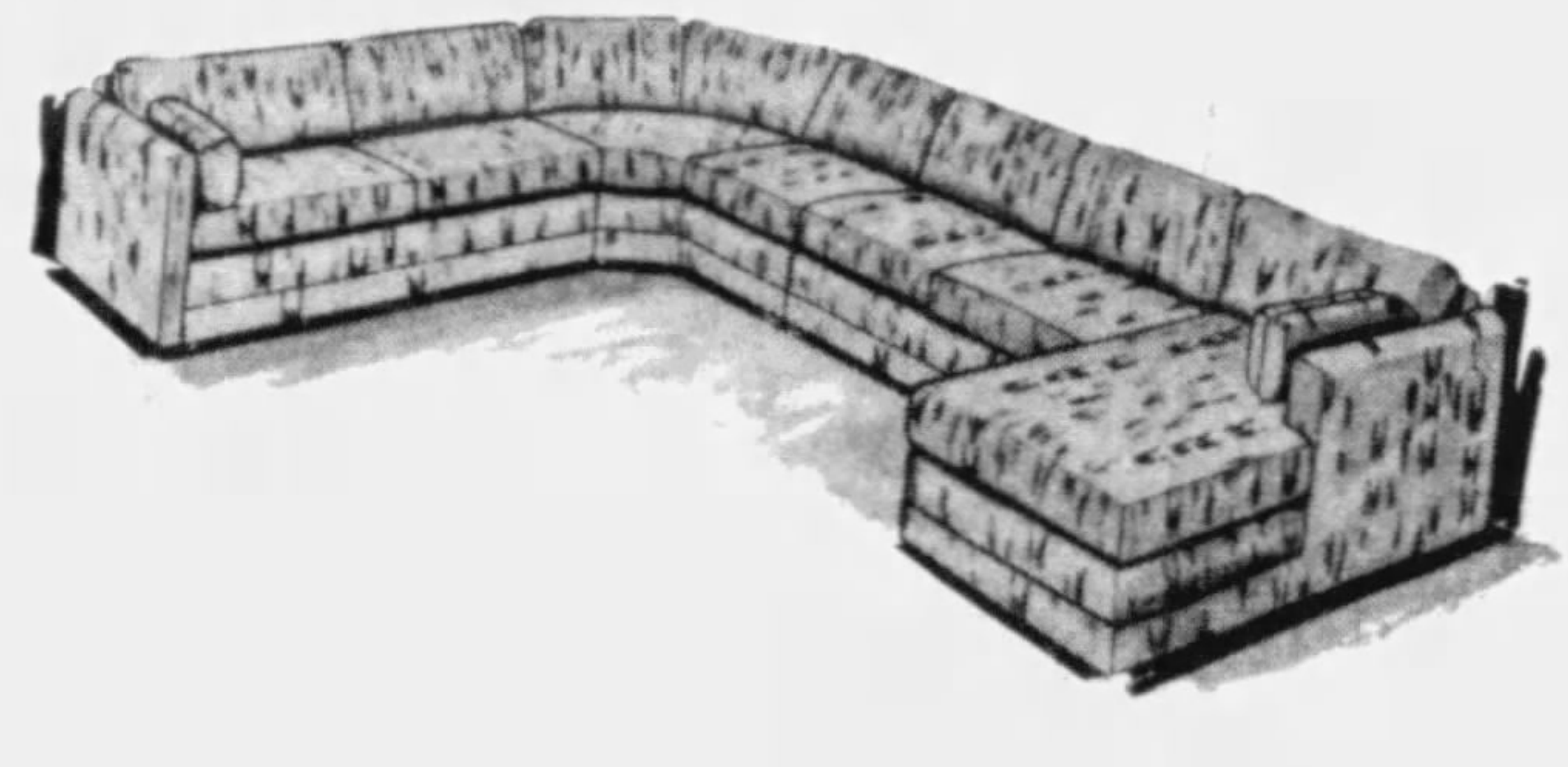
Sunburned and fatigued, Gronquist and Riddell speculated about how long the creek would remain canoeable without more rain, and when the next canoe trip might be fit into their schedules. Neither can get enough of what Riddell calls "seeing the magic, feeling the magic."

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