



# PETE SZILAGYI

## Journalist

Austin American-Statesman Reporter  
1980-2015

“

***In all stories I pursued, I was the reporter presenting facts, but in this case the creek's beauty, hard to overstate, spoke for itself.***”

Thirty-eight years ago, City Editor Ed Crowell handed me a challenging assignment—produce a series of articles looking at the geology, history and biology of Barton Creek and Barton Springs, and the people who use it and who live nearby.

Development near the creek and over the aquifer recharge zone was a contentious issue in the early 1980s. Austinites were aware of the creek and the Barton Springs Pool. But perhaps not the many miles of creek looping westward to its source. My articles ran in the Austin American-Statesman daily from July 11 to August 1, 1982 under the header: “Barton Creek, its life and spirit.”

Though I loved the creek, my efforts were not advocating for either side in the on-going developer vs. environmentalist conflict of that era. In all stories I pursued, I was the reporter presenting facts, but in this case the creek's beauty, hard to overstate, spoke for itself.

To begin the reporting project—with the help of geologists and USGS contour maps—I found what appeared to be the creek's headwaters at a spring in Hays County and followed it from road crossing to road crossing as tributaries added volume and the creek began to flow more or less full-time.

When the flow was more predictable, my friend Wayne Gronquist and I canoed and kayaked most of the creek, frequently portaging around small dams and shallows. Dozens of deer and cows watched us pass.

I was surprised by the number of homes and cottages near the creek in rural areas, but also by the irregularity of the flow. In several places the creek suddenly disappeared and reappeared downstream - water had briefly dropped into limestone channels and voids under the creekbed.

Whitewater might be followed by calm, clear, deep pools with large fish, turtles and the occasional water snake. Riffles broke the surface where small springs flowed out through the creekbed. Springs along the bank, often hidden by maidenhair ferns, dribbled into the creek.

And the people . . . among them, Jack Bleakley, a geologist and oil wildcatter, owned the ranch with the source spring. He tried to be a good custodian of the infant creek and always aware of the folks downstream. Toward Dripping Springs, the Stark family operated the creekside Sports Country children's camp. The Starks are still at it nearly 40 years later.

Fabled Texas writer J. Frank Dobie's Paisano Ranch was and is downstream, now owned by U.T. and used as a getaway for writers whose projects earn the university's Paisano Fellowship. Closer to Austin are the creekside remains of Dietrich Bohls's cabins. The early settler is thought to have built them in the 1860s.

# PETE SZILAGYI CONT'D

## Hill Country's pride flowing toward peril

Geologists call it a typical Hill Country creek. But in Austin, Barton Creek represents something special and all that is right with the city. With development creeping to the edge, water quality in the creek is in jeopardy. This is the first in a series of articles that look at past, present and future flowing along the creek, and the pollution that threatens it.

By PETE SZILAGYI  
Austin American-Statesman Staff

Uncle Billy Barton, said to be a man who sailed southwest, might spin in his grave if he could see the springs and creek that bear his name.

Every afternoon, hundreds crowd Barton Springs and lower Barton Creek to swim, sunbathe, sit in lounge chairs, wade, skip flat rocks and people-watch.

Few cities have such a scenic waterway in Barton Creek within a short distance of downtown. No major city has a Barton Springs.

Believing in their waters is a strong tradition. Treatment Austin can



**Barton Creek:**  
its life and spirit

claim on its own, and the valley of greenery the creek has cut allows an unusually wide variety of wildlife to exist.

Barton Creek has been a valuable natural resource for hundreds of thousands of years, but in the 1900s every stone Billy Barton lived on a bluff above the springs, a city has grown around the creek and springs. In the end, Austin might just have them to clean up.

— Pete Szilagyi, Austin, TX

Where Barton Creek's looping path approaches West Lake Hills, the inventor Edwin Foster used heavy equipment to dam the creek and contour its flood plain to his liking.

W.H. Bullard's creekside house once stood at the present site of the Lost Creek Country Club's clubhouse. He once owned hundreds of acres nearby as well, which became the Lost Creek subdivision. But Bullock said he offered to sell the scenic creek valley to the city of Austin for parkland, but the city declined.

**BARTON CREEK**  
  
**TIME STREAM**