



PHIL STERZING

Citizens for a Barton Creek Park, Planner

“

I look back on it with a tinge of sadness because there was that golden moment when we could have had a really outstanding regional park, and it didn't happen.”

My family has actually lived here for over 150 years. They go back to the early pioneers. Both my parents were very big on nature. I can remember my mother getting real upset, with the kids that were shooting all the songbirds with BB guns, including one of my friends who was doing it. I was just taught to have a lot of respect for wildlife.

I grew up in Rosedale in the early '40s and '50s, and I was born in '39. We were on the, almost, the outskirts of the city then. There were wilderness areas all over Shoal Creek. I had a friend that actually ran traps up Shoal Creek and sold the pelts to Tom Miller's hide house. So, it was pretty wild on the outskirts of the city. And so we played up there, it was just a magical place.

I guess I couldn't have been much older than 10 or 11, somewhere in there. They built a sewer line right up Shoal Creek, and I mean they went straight up the middle of the creek, which of course is rock primarily. So, they blasted all this out. And there were some beautiful little areas; one was a falls, almost like a waterfall that was close to an Indian campsite. There were some little caves on one side of it, and they just really blasted all that out, and of course they put the line in, then they put concrete everywhere. Only later did I realize that once you blast the bottom of a creek like that it's never going to flow again in a natural way. I mean, it will flow when it rains, but because the water is just going to go right down through those cracks that the dynamite creates...so, that stuck in my mind, you know. Progress is a double edge sword.

I thought that there's got to be a better way, at that time than just dynamiting the bottom of the creek that way, to put in the sewer line. And so that was a sad part of my childhood. I mean, didn't freak out over it or anything, but I just felt like it was useless, that there must have been a better way to do it.

I studied economics at U.T. but I got very involved in politics after awhile. So I worked in the Young Democrats; I was president of the U.T. Young Democrats, and I was co-chairman of the Kennedy Johnson campaign in '60. I've always thought in terms of political action. I'm more of an idea person, in terms of politics, than a personality.

I had been living in New York City and then I decided to come back to Austin, and I thought, "Well, I'm going to go up the old trail that goes up to Campbell's Hole," and I was used to that trail because the Audubon Society held their bird walks early in the morning along that trail.

I got out there and I was just totally horrified by what had happened, because all the giant trees that were along the creek were gone. I mean, there was just a limestone ledge, and they had dynamited and ran a, at least they hadn't run the sewer line down the bottom of the creek, but they ran it on one side and then I think it skipped, you know, zigzags around.

PHIL STERZING CONT'D

That's when I decided I'm going to try to do something about this, stop it from going any further up the creek. I don't think I was a member of the Sierra Club but I joined it, because that was one of the most activist environmental groups around. I talked to the president of it, Dan Willard, who was a professor of botany at U.T. and he was already really interested in it and I told him some of the ideas that I had and he said, "Okay, write it up and we'll present it at one of our meetings."

I immediately went home, and it didn't take me long to write up. The plan was basically on a legal page, back and front. I mean, it was sort of a dream plan really. The basis of it was the city purchasing the land all the way out to Highway 71, and then I also thought, "Well, we need to buy a pretty wide strip so that you won't have houses sitting right up on top of the cliff looking down, you know, you'll feel like you're in a wilderness when you're walking along the trail. I started to think, we really need to try to protect the whole watershed area. I knew that you could have a large-lot zoning, where you get limited to five-acre lots or even 10-acre lots.



Because having worked for the water quality board, I had read about these other states and what they were doing to ensure the quality of the water for their reservoirs. And one of them was to zone for large lots. So, I put that in there. I took that back to Dan and he said, "I like this, you know, we're going to adopt this or try to adopt it at the next meeting." Somehow the word got out, I guess through their newsletter and all, and it was packed with people.

It did pass and then we decided we would go and present it to the City Council which we did. It's amazing how much public support there was for the greenbelts, not just the Barton Creek but all of them. Once they did that, most people I think assumed, "Well, we've accomplished, you know, it's a done deal now. They're going to use this money (I think it was \$2 million, quite a bit for those days), and buy the land up." Well somehow it got caught up in the city bureaucracy and no one acted on the purchase of the land, for years. And then people circled back around later and said, "Hey, what's the deal with this money? I mean, how much land have you bought?" Nothing. And of course the tragedy is that in the meantime the property values had escalated, hugely. I look back on it with a tinge of sadness because there was that golden moment when we could have had a really outstanding regional park, and it didn't happen.

It's sort of amazing that more didn't get done. But I don't know if you'll ever know the story of why it didn't get done all the way to Highway 71. My own theory is that the land speculators and the business interests were working behind the scenes to slow the whole environmental movement down because they did not want it, you know, the people that ultimately developed all that Barton Creek Country Club and all that.

I do think that if we had bought all that land, there would have been much more public input. As people used that park they would have said, "Well, we need to protect the surrounding areas," you know. So, you'd get pressure to get more political action. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's what I think would have happened. Otherwise, your developers are going to be constantly pushing to develop every piece of land.

-Excerpted from Living Springs documentary interview by Karen Kocher, 2017