Saving the Big Thicket

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In 1831, Stephen F. Austin proclaimed that his sole ambition was “The redemption of Texas from the wilderness.” In less than one hundred years, Austin’s dream for the Lone Star State had been nearly fulfilled. During the last half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of people poured into Texas. Railroads and highways crisscrossed the state. Bonanza timber operators, oil explorers, farmers, and cattlemen had whittled away sizable portions of the wilderness. By 1920, the Big Thicket was being depleted as were other wild regions of the state.

Some residents of the Big Thicket began to react against the wanton destruction. In 1927, R. E. Jackson, a railroad conductor whose route carried him through a portion of the Big Thicket, organized the East Texas Big Thicket Association at his home in Silsbee, Texas. The Association’s motive was not the redemption of Texas, but rather the salvation of the wilderness. Their goal was simple. They merely wished to preserve for posterity a sizable portion of the Big Thicket in its natural state. Jackson, a man of strong conviction, personally attempted to preserve a portion of the Thicket by leasing 18,000 acres of land in the southeast corner of Polk County along the Polk-Hardin County line. Because of the dense underbrush, this area was known as the “Tight-eye” country. Regarding this tract
as a nucleus, Jackson and his followers agitated for both state and federal action to save at least 430,000 acres of the Big Thicket as a wildlife preserve. According to Jackson’s plan, this acreage would cover nearly all of Polk County with a slight spill-over into neighboring San Jacinto County to the west. Jackson’s proposal was enthusiastically endorsed by the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce, which believed such a project would bring more tourists into the Beaumont region. Ray Gill, an officer in the Chamber of Commerce, also served as secretary of the East Texas Big Thicket Association.³

In the early years, Jackson and his group were unable to generate enough widespread interest in the Big Thicket to gain the political support necessary to preserve the region. But gradually attitudes began to change. By the mid-1930s, the Association had won the support of several members of the Texas Academy of Science, who viewed the Thicket as an outdoor botanical laboratory.

More support was generated by Hal B. Parks and Victor L. Cory, who led a short botanical expedition into the Big Thicket in 1936. At the time, Cory and Parks were the two leading botanists in the state. Both men worked for the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. Parks was the State Apiculturalist working out of the State Apicultural Laboratory in San Antonio. Cory served as the Range Botanist for the Sonora branch of the Experiment Station.⁴ The East Texas Big Thicket Association subsequently published the findings of the expedition. The Cory and Parks report became the “Bible” of those wishing to preserve the region. It became the “most referred to” work about the Big Thicket.⁵ In reality, the report was based on incomplete research, and was nothing more than a checklist of the plants, mammals, reptiles, fish, birds, and Mollusca that were supposed to inhabit the Big Thicket in the 1930s. However, since the Parks and Cory survey assumed such an auspicious place in the minds of those seeking to preserve the area, it deserves close analysis.

Parks and Cory first became involved with the East Texas Big Thicket Association while attending a field meet of the Texas Academy of Science at the dedication of the Palmetto State Park in Gonzales County in March 1936. The two botanists were visiting the park to obtain plant specimens and to act as lecture guides for those attending the dedication.⁶
At the field meet, supporters of the East Texas Big Thicket Association approached the men and asked them to conduct a botanical survey of the Thicket. Both Cory and Parks were non-committal, for they were extremely busy preparing a manuscript entitled “Catalogue of the Flora of Texas” for publication as Experiment Station Bulletin Number 550. Nevertheless, the members of the Association continued to badger the two botanists. Also, Dr. Don O. Baird, President of the Texas Academy of Science and a biology professor at Sam Houston State Teachers College at Huntsville, began to plead with Cory and Parks to conduct a survey of the Thicket. Gradually, Parks began to relent. He informed Baird that he would make the survey if Dr. Arthur B. Conner, the director of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, consented to the project.\(^7\)

In July 1936, Baird and Parks met at a farmer’s short course on the campus of Texas A & M College. Baird once again renewed his pleas, and Parks again referred him to Conner. The two parted company after Baird agreed to present the proposal to Conner. Parks remained on the campus for a few days following the completion of the short course.\(^8\) During this time he talked with Dr. Walter F. Taylor, an employee of the United States Biological Survey stationed on the A & M campus, and a strong Big Thicket advocate. In their conversation, Taylor remarked that he was happy to hear that Parks and Cory were going to make a survey of the Big Thicket. Parks pleaded ignorance, claiming that the director had not informed him of any such project. Taylor answered Parks’ protestation “with a smile from ear to ear.”\(^9\) Taylor indicated that he also would accompany the survey party. Returning to San Antonio, Parks could only surmise that the trip had been approved.

Official confirmation soon came. In early August 1936, Conner wrote Parks and Cory asking them to cooperate in the project. In addition, Conner sent the botanists a copy of a telegram he had received from R. E. Jackson. In the telegram, Jackson indicated that U.S. Senator Morris Sheppard of Texarkana, Texas, strongly urged that a biological survey of the Big Thicket should be completed immediately. At the time, Sheppard was supporting the East Texas Big Thicket Association’s plans to create a national park in the region. With Sheppard’s backing, Jackson officially requested that Parks and Cory be assigned to the survey. Cory, however, was not too enthusias-
tic about the project. He informed Conner that he wished to discuss the matter with Parks before consenting to participate.\textsuperscript{10}

Eventually, Parks persuaded Cory to assist him, and the trip was scheduled for September 1936. At the appointed date, Cory and Parks met on the A&M campus, deposited their manuscript on Texas flora at the Experiment Station, and then proceeded to Huntsville. At Huntsville, the men were joined by Dr. Baird and by Dr. Samuel R. Warner, a botany professor at Sam Houston State Teachers College. On September 12, this little group reached Camp Jackson, a hunter’s camp in the Big Thicket west of Kountze in Hardin County.\textsuperscript{11}

The first day in the Thicket, Jackson and John Knight, a hunter for the U.S. Biological Survey, piloted Cory and Parks through a portion of the 18,000-acre lease. The party spent the morning of the second day exploring different localities within the Thicket. That afternoon, about 100 people from Beaumont and the surrounding area gathered at Camp Jackson for a barbecue to celebrate the survey. Cory and Parks gave talks relating to the plant life of the Thicket. A thunderstorm prematurely ended the proceedings, and the botanists drove into Beaumont to spend the night.\textsuperscript{12}

On Monday morning, September 14, Parks and Cory addressed the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce on the plant life of the region. They spent the remainder of the day attending a meeting on the promotion of resources in southeast Texas and viewed a pasture demonstration in the southern part of Jefferson County.\textsuperscript{13}

On Tuesday, the survey party again returned to the Big Thicket region just north of Silsbee. This time, P. A. Winkler, a landscape gardener and amateur botanist working on a study of the Trinity and Neches River bottoms, served as guide. On this second sojourn into the Thicket, Cory seemed more impressed with the spectacle of a burning oil well near Silsbee than with the flora of the Thicket. He remarked that the burning well was a magnificent sight, shooting a mass of flame, smoke, and mud over 100 feet into the air. After viewing the well, the party spent the rest of the day at Pine Knot, a private preserve of one of the Big Thicket backers. The next day Cory and Parks left the Big Thicket for a plant-collecting expedition along the Gulf Coast. The botanists had spent only 2 1/2 days of actual
exploration in the Thicket. The remainder of their time had been devoted to speechmaking and other public relations activities.\textsuperscript{14}

By the beginning of November 1936, Parks, who assumed total responsibility for the final report, was hard at work preparing a manuscript that described the findings of the expedition. In a letter to Cory, he outlined his general plan for the report. For some unknown reason he chose to define the Big Thicket based on its physiogeological factors rather than its botanical contents.

Pursuing this approach, Parks claimed that the Big Thicket was a natural life zone whose northern border was the last shoreline of the Pliocene Age. Its southern boundary was set as the shore line of the Gulf of Mexico during its transgression in the previous interglacial period. Parks set the western border as the bluff line of the “Ancestral Brazos River.” Since the study dealt only with Texas, he established the eastern boundary of the Thicket at the Sabine River: the dividing line between the Lone Star State and Louisiana. Under this “physiogeology” definition, the Big Thicket encompassed 3,350,000 acres. Parks pointed out that there were regions of similar vegetation scattered throughout the northern United States. However, he maintained that the Big Thicket differed by being more extensive and by being less affected by lumbering operations. Later-day preservationists were to cling to the notion that the region stretched over 3,000,000 acres, yet they rejected the idea that the Big Thicket was unique simply because of its size.\textsuperscript{15}

After completing this portion of his report, Parks compiled a series of six lists, which enumerated the mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, fish, Mollusca, and plants that were supposed to exist in the Big Thicket. All of these lists were based on excerpts from pre-existing checklists that had been published prior to the Big Thicket survey. Parks merely took these checklists and selected those organisms that he believed best described the flora and fauna within the Big Thicket region. After compiling these lists, he distributed them to people he considered to be biological experts. These experts were to make corrections and additions to the list.\textsuperscript{16}

The largest list in the report dealt with the plant life of the Thicket. In compiling this list, Parks simply took his publication \textit{Catalogue of the Flora of Texas} and extracted the names of those plants that grew in the
timbered portion of southeast Texas. Next, he sent the list to Dr. S. R. Warner at Sam Houston State Teachers College for revision. Finally, in November 1936, Parks sent the plant list to Cory, soliciting his comments and corrections. After omitting several plants, Cory returned the list to Parks complaining, “I suppose there are various others that should be omitted but my present knowledge of the vegetation of that area is too limited to know this as a fact.” Cory’s remark merely served to underscore the superficiality of the entire report. It was at best nothing more than a speculative checklist of living organisms within an ill-defined region.

Over the next several weeks Parks continued to polish the manuscript. Finally, in late December 1936, he completed the report. Parks sent one copy to Dr. Walter Taylor. He retained only one copy for his personal file. By this time Parks was enthusiastic about the report. In a letter to Cory, he exclaimed, “One thing is sure it is quite a complete and correct list of those organisms which occur within the limits of the original Big Thicket.” But he confided to a rather skeptical Cory that the report was “sufficiently flexible as to cover any demand made upon it.”

Eventually in 1937, the report was published under the title The Fauna and Flora of the Big Thicket Area. The Beaumont Chamber of Commerce and the Texas Academy of Science provided the funds to print the manuscript. The first edition of 2,000 copies were distributed in November 1937. A revised edition of 2,000 copies were published in 1938. From the date of its publication, the Parks and Cory survey was accepted as gospel by those pushing to preserve the Thicket.

Actually, at least two scientific publications partially concerned with the Big Thicket region pre-dated the Parks and Cory study. Although neither publication contained as extensive a list of plants and animals as the Parks and Cory report, both studies offered alternative methods of identifying a Big Thicket-type environment from surrounding areas. Both explanations were superior to the “physio-geology” definition of Parks.

The first study, published as an article in the 1904 edition of the Proceeding of the Iowa Academy of Science, was entitled “An Ecological Study of the Sabine and Neches Valleys, Texas.” James Gow, a U.S. Forest Service employee and author of the article, visited the Big Thicket region in the winter of 1902–3, and again the following year. Gow was in Texas as
part of a United States Bureau of Forestry team, surveying the holdings of the Kirby Lumber Company. As a result of the survey, Gow traveled over Hardin, Jasper, Newton, Orange, Sabine, Angelina, and San Augustine counties. Gow was impressed with the wide variety of flora within the region, and he took the opportunity to record several observations on the ecology of the region.\(^{23}\)

Gow identified six ecological systems that separated this region from the other forested areas of Texas. By utilizing an ecological approach, Gow predated those preservationists in the 1960s who attempted to define the Big Thicket on ecological rather than geological factors. Gow named his six systems pine flats, pine upland, high hammock, swamp, low hammock, and hardwood bottom. Each system contains its own unique association of plants and trees. Although this study was incomplete, it was the first attempt to describe the region based on ecological factors and not simply on myth or tradition.\(^{24}\)

The second study, written by Professor Roland Harper, entitled “A Week in East Texas” appeared in the July 1920 edition of the *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*. On his abbreviated trip through Texas, Harper passed through Hardin and Polk counties in August 1918. He was in Texas to collect specimens of *Ilex vomitoria* (yaupon) for the United States Department of Agriculture. While searching for this plant, he also compiled extensive notes on the various botanical regions of East Texas. On his sojourn through the Big Thicket region, he was particularly impressed with the longleaf pine region in eastern Hardin County. In the longleaf forest he found shrubbery that generally prospers in damp spots growing in association with xerophytes.\(^{25}\)

After viewing the longleaf region, Harper moved into the loblolly region just twelve miles southeast of Kountze. He referred to this region as the hammock belt, and claimed that it was probably the densest upland forest in Texas. He noted that the residents of the area referred to the hammock land as the Big Thicket.\(^{26}\) After listing the primary trees, shrubs, vines, and herbs of the hammock land, Harper remarked that this region possessed more species of timber trees than any other “reasonably homogeneous area of the same size in Texas.”\(^{27}\) Although Harper did not attempt to define the Big Thicket, he believed that soil composition, not
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determining factor in creating the hammock land plant community.\textsuperscript{28}

In November 1937, Harper, now a botany professor at the University of Alabama, obtained a copy of *The Fauna and Flora of the Big Thicket Area*. After reading the report, Harper wrote to Cory questioning Parks' definition of the Big Thicket. Harper exclaimed that he was surprised to see that Parks had included the longleaf region in the definition of the Big Thicket. He remarked that he was under the impression that the term “Big Thicket” applied to only a portion of the hammock land. He finished the inquiry by stating that a longleaf pine forest should not be classified as a thicket.\textsuperscript{29}

Cory dutifully responded to Harper's criticism. In his reply, Cory proclaimed, “So far as I am concerned my idea is in accordance with yours for I know I would not call a longleaf pine forest a thicket.”\textsuperscript{30} However, Cory informed Harper to contact Parks for a full explanation of the definition of the region. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to indicate if Parks ever answered Harper's criticism.\textsuperscript{31}

Although Parks and Cory's report was superficial, it served as a rallying point for the East Texas Big Thicket Association. As a result of the survey, articles describing the scenic beauty of the Big Thicket began to appear in various Texas newspapers. If nothing else, the report secured some much needed publicity for the preservation movement. After the publication of the report, the Association continued to gain the support of the scientific community. At the June 1937 meeting of the Texas Academy of Science, R. E. Jackson addressed the group on the importance of preserving the Thicket for scientific experimentation and study. Others, such as Dr. Don O. Baird, president of the Academy, echoed Jackson's sentiment. Virtually every speaker who addressed the session commented that the Big Thicket should be preserved because of its value to the botanist and biologist.\textsuperscript{32}

Armed with the Cory and Parks' survey, and the growing support of the scientific community, the East Texas Big Thicket Association, with the aid of Senator Sheppard, now began to agitate for the federal government to consider the Big Thicket as a potential site for a national park. Finally, in January 1938, Herbert Maier, a regional director of the Park Service, notified the Association that he planned to inspect the Big Thicket.
in the near future to determine if it should be included in the National Park System. Buoyed by this news, the Association and the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce began recruiting guides to carry Maier into the depths of the Thicket.33

However, a series of unforeseen events frustrated the early preservationist movement. The discovery of large deposits of oil in Polk County in 1936, and again in 1942, upset the plans of the Association to set aside the entire county as a wilderness preserve. Suddenly, men were more interested in drilling for oil than in saving wildlife. Also, the outbreak of World War II brought on an unprecedented demand for lumber products. Timber production began increasing in 1940. By 1942, total wood production in Texas, stimulated by heavy war orders, increased by twenty percent over the previous year. Washington authorities placed twenty-two items made from wood on the war’s critical list. Wood was being used in building battleships, training aircraft, and barracks. Nearly every new cargo ship required 500,000 board-feet of timber. Faced with the wartime need for wood products, the drive to remove the Big Thicket from timber production faded into the background.34

Additionally, just a few years prior to the Park Service survey, the federal government had expended nearly $3,000,000 to establish over 1,700,000 acres of national forest in Texas. The national forest land was divided into four separate units called Sam Houston National Forest, Davy Crocket National Forest, Angelina National Forest, and Sabine National Forest. The four units formed an arc over the northern and northwestern boundaries of the Big Thicket. As a result of this large acquisition, it was doubtful that the federal government would have been willing to assume an additional 435,000 acres so close to the newly established national forest.35

Faced with these reverses, the drive to save the Big Thicket lost its momentum. Jackson, however, continued to campaign for the preservation of the region. His efforts were not entirely in vain. In the early 1950s, a Houston group, known as the Outdoor Nature Club, purchased a 450-acre tract in San Jacinto County and named it the Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary. The club, which also called itself the Little Thicket Association, intended to preserve the tract’s original ecological balance. This group
also transplanted endangered species of trees, plants, and shrubs to their Houston homes.36 As the drive to save the Thicket faded, newspapers carried such stories as “Do you Remember the Big Thicket?”37 The East Texas Big Thicket Association continued to exist as a paper organization until it finally expired in the late 1950s.38

Although the East Texas Big Thicket Association ceased to be an effective organization, other groups kept the Big Thicket before the public. In 1955, Bill Daniel, a wealthy rancher from Liberty County and a former Governor of Guam, organized an annual Big Thicket Trek leading from his Plantation Ranch to Beaumont. The trek, which traveled throughout the Thicket, was simply a trail ride to celebrate the opening of the annual rodeo in Beaumont. Although the treks were not designed to preserve the Big Thicket, they did serve to remind the public of the region. However, Bill Daniel was to play a more important role in the preservation of the Thicket than merely leading a group of contemporary cowboys through the region once a year.39

In 1957, Bill’s brother Price Daniel was inaugurated as governor of Texas. After his brother became governor, Bill, an avid Big Thicket hunter, urged his brother to establish a state park in the region. Price, however, was not a woodsman, and at first he paid little attention to his brother’s plea. He was soon to change his mind. In 1960, enroute to a governor’s conference, Daniel spent several days vacationing in Yellowstone National Park. Here, he was overwhelmed by the number of tourists flocking to the park. After viewing Yellowstone, he became determined to create a similar tourist-attracting park to bolster the economy of the Big Thicket region.40

Daniel did not immediately publicize this plan after he returned to Texas. First, he personally toured the Big Thicket searching for potential park sites in September 1961. His wife and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn accompanied the governor on this trip. Lancelot Rosier, a lifelong resident of the region and the foremost authority on the flora of the Big Thicket, served as a guide for this little party.41 Rosier’s entire life revolved around the preservation of the Thicket. He had even accompanied Cory and Parks on their survey in 1936. Although Rosier possessed little formal education, he was a voracious reader of botanical publications.
Through sheer hard work he mastered the scientific nomenclature of hundreds of plants in the region. His expertise was so well-known that trained botanists researching in the Thicket sought his advice. A shy, unassuming man, he was ill-equipped to lead a movement to preserve the Thicket; yet his love of the region served to motivate other more capable leaders. His major contribution was providing an almost spiritual inspiration for the preservationist movement. On this tour, Rosier showed the governor several sites that would have been suitable for a park. Daniel later returned for a few other exploratory trips in the region.\footnote{42}

Since the timber industry owned a majority of the land in the Big Thicket, Daniel knew that he would need their support to establish a state park in the region. Consequently, before making his plan public, Daniel summoned representatives of the largest timber firms in the state to a meeting at the Rice Hotel in Houston in late 1961. About thirty representatives answered the Governor’s call. At the meeting Daniel presented his program, and asked for timber industry support.\footnote{43}

The governor’s plan called for the state to purchase 15,000 to 20,000 acres in fee from the timber firms. This acreage would contain the park headquarters and also serve as the primary tourist attraction. Also, he told the representatives that he wished to lease an additional 200,000 to 300,000 acres as a wildlife preserve. Within this lease the state would regulate hunting, fishing, and timber cutting—similar to the arrangements in a national forest. In addition, Daniel told the group that certain areas of the proposed park would be set aside as total wilderness areas with no access roads or nature trails.\footnote{44}

In order to make his plan more palatable, Daniel, a strong states-righter, informed the meeting that if the state failed to act, the federal government might eventually seize a large portion of the Big Thicket, declare it a wilderness area, and halt all lumbering activities. At least, he argued, the state plan would keep most of the land in active timber production. This was not an empty threat. In 1961, the Park Service’s “West Gulf Coastal Plain Type Study” had identified the Big Thicket as an area that should be studied for possible inclusion in the National Park System. Although a few firms were noncommittal, Daniel left the meeting believing that a majority of the timber people would support his program.\footnote{45}
On February 22, 1962, Daniel unveiled his program to the public. In a press release he claimed that a Big Thicket State Park and Game Preserve would be a major boost to the sagging Texas tourist industry. Daniel maintained that with the restoration of such native game as bear, bobcat, and mink, the region would rival Yellowstone Park. The governor again sounded the warning that if the state failed to act then the federal government would probably intervene in the region. In concluding his remarks, Daniel called on all interested parties to meet in Beaumont in March 1962, to initiate plans for the park.46

Daniel’s endorsement of a Big Thicket park was ill-timed, for he was also campaigning for an unprecedented fourth term as governor. Some of his political opponents used this announcement to accuse Daniel of playing politics with the state park system. According to the opposition, Daniel was simply using the Big Thicket State Park concept as a ploy to gain more votes. Archer Fullingim, the liberal editor of the Kountze News, was one of Daniel’s most vocal critics.47 After reading about the proposed park, Fullingim proclaimed, “I can smell P. Daniel politics in the air.”48 Fullingim further claimed that the park would adversely affect the economy of Hardin County by taking timber land out of production. He feared such a move would lead to high unemployment in the region. “The thicket is our meal ticket,” he exclaimed.49 Also, rumors began to circulate claiming that Daniel planned to set aside over 400,000 acres for the park, a move that some counties felt would cripple their tax base.50

Shunting aside these attacks, Daniel proceeded to place his plan before the State Parks Board: the governmental agency that recommends the establishment of new state parks. At the board meeting, the cries of “politics” filled the air. Board member Ed Kilman, editor emeritus of the Houston Post editorial page, led the attack. Kilman proclaimed, “This is obviously a political thing, no sensible person would deny that.”51 Brad Smith, a Daniel aide who presented the plan to the board, argued that he was unaware that the Big Thicket park was a campaign issue. Kilman snapped, “Then you haven’t had your eyes open.”52

Kilman based his attack on the timing of Daniel’s announced support of the park. According to Kilman, the Big Thicket had “been there for years, and it will last until after the May 5 primary.”53 Finally, the Parks Board vice-
chairman, Reese Martin, moved that the board take no action on the Big Thicket plan, and the motion was adopted. Daniel was both surprised and dismayed by Kilman’s attack, for he had re-appointed Kilman to the State Parks Board in 1957. As Daniel stated, “Kilman stuck the knife.”

Although the State Parks Board failed to endorse his plan, Daniel held high hopes of gaining popular support at the Beaumont meeting. The meeting was held on March 29, 1962, at the Ridgeway Motor Hotel. Over 300 people representing twenty-two counties and civic organizations attended the confab. In his opening remarks, Daniel stressed that the meeting was to be only a planning session and lead to both the establishment of a Big Thicket Association and a survey concerning the feasibility of a park in the Big Thicket. Once again, Daniel reiterated the danger of federal action if the state failed to act. He declared, “No development of public roads, no residences, no mechanical equipment, no economic uses such as grazing, timber management, and oil development would be permitted under this federal plan.” After the meeting, Daniel led the representatives on a 160-mile trip through the Big Thicket, pointing out prospective sites for inclusion in the park. Daniel left the meeting feeling confident of success. He claimed over ninety-six percent of those attending the conference approved of the park.

Daniel drew his chief support from elements who would have profited from the establishment of the park. Various chambers of commerce, the Texas Tourist Council, and the Texas Restaurant Association enthusiastically endorsed the park. They were, of course, excited about the prospective economic benefit of a large state park. Additionally, the Alabama-Coushatta Indians strongly supported the project. They believed that a park would probably bring a large increase to their tourist-based tribal treasury.

Daniel’s plans for a park were dashed by the results of the May 5 Democratic gubernatorial primary. Daniel finished a dismal third. John Connally, a rancher from Floresville, Texas, captured the nomination in a second primary later that year. The election results were a bitter blow to Daniel, and over the next few months he did not pursue the park project. However, by the fall of 1962, his spirits had revived, and he renewed his efforts to establish a state park in the Big Thicket.
On October 31, 1962, Daniel sent letters to thirty-one Texans asking them to serve on a Big Thicket Study Commission designed to formulate an objective survey of the region and to select sites for the park. However, this time Daniel ensured that the timing of his renewed effort would not raise the cry of “politics.” He cautioned the committee members to keep their appointment a secret. He stated that he would announce the formation of the committee after the November general election. The committee was composed of a mixture of civic leaders, politicians, oil men, and timber company officials.  

Daniel also outlined the criteria that the committee was to follow in studying the park problem. First, he maintained that “Any land included in the park would be limited to gift and leases which would not detract from the state’s financial responsibility to parks already established.” He informed the appointees that the size and location of the park must contribute to the economy of the area, and also protect timber, mineral, grazing, and hunting rights. Finally, Daniel directed the committee to meet with him at the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation near Livingston, Texas, on November 19, 1962, to formalize the arrangements.  

Daniel knew that the establishment of a state park still hinged on the support of the large timber firms. For this reason, he announced at the gathering that Dempsie Henley would head the committee. At the time, Henley was a real estate broker in Liberty, Texas. Because of his occupation, Henley enjoyed a business relationship with several of the timber firms in the region. Daniel reasoned that Henley would be able to use his contacts to gain timber industry approval of the project. Once again, Daniel reiterated that a leasing system with the timber firms would be the best hope for the park. Daniel asked Henley and the other committee members to prepare a “general approach” report before January 1, 1963. Daniel established this short deadline because he wished to include the report in his final recommendations to the legislature.  

Shortly after the meeting at the Indian reservation, Henley called the committee to its first working session in Beaumont. At the gathering, Henley announced that the major concern of the committee was to secure the support of the timber industry. Unfortunately, attendance at this first
meeting and subsequent meetings was light. As a result, the park never received the support of the timber companies. Consequently, the final report did not reach Price Daniel before he left the Governor’s Mansion in January 1963. Nevertheless, armed with a preliminary report from Henley, Daniel in his final message to the legislature, urged the creation of a Big Thicket Park Authority. This agency would be allowed to accept leases and gifts of land and also be empowered to purchase land and develop the park by issuing revenue bonds. If properly established, Daniel believed the park could be self-financed.  

Coupled with the apathetic attitude of the committee and the prospective loss of strong gubernatorial support, Henley realized that the prospects of securing a park were dim. Faced with this dilemma he decided to try to generate popular support for the project, hoping that an aroused public would force the politicians to create the park. To initiate his plan, Henley called on all those who supported the park to attend a barbecue dinner at Liberty, Texas. Four hundred and fifty people showed up to voice their approval of the project. Both Governor Daniel and his brother Bill attended the celebration, and enthusiastically endorsed the project. At the meeting, Bill Daniel suggested that the Big Thicket Park should be composed of several small scattered portions. Daniel believed that, by utilizing this technique, representative samples of the entire region would be included in the park. The idea was unique, and Henley decided to pursue this approach. Daniel’s suggestion later became known as the “String of Pearls” concept.

Although the celebration gained publicity for the project, it did not remove the undercurrent of opposition to the park. One of the primary arguments against the park centered around the possible loss of tax revenue. The critics contended that the park would remove a large tract of timber land from the tax rolls. Some county officials were afraid that such a move might wreak havoc with the finances of the county school systems, which received a large share of their revenue from the taxes paid by the timber firms. Also, some people were frightened that they would lose their homes if their land were inside the proposed boundaries of the park. Others feared that a park would restrict their hunting and fishing rights. Faced with this opposition, and the uncertain support of the new governor, John
Connally, the Big Thicket supporters realized that they needed a permanent citizens’ organization to focus publicity on the Big Thicket Park issue.66

Eventually, a group of concerned citizens met in Saratoga, Texas, on October 4, 1964, and formed the Big Thicket Historical Association. Lance Rosier was named temporary president. In addition to preserving a portion of the wilderness, the group hoped to establish a museum displaying natural history exhibits of the Big Thicket region. One week later, Henley was invited to address the Association. In early November 1964, he became the permanent president of the organization. The Association also selected a full slate of officers, and petitioned the state for a charter. The appropriate articles of incorporation were filed with the office of the Secretary of State, and the charter was granted. The official name of the organization was the Big Thicket Association.67

To celebrate the formal establishment of the Association, the group decided to hold its first annual “Get Together” in Saratoga on January 9, 1965. The Association hoped the celebration would entice new members, gain publicity, and earn some money for the Association’s treasury. They had hoped to attract about 600 people, and they were amazed and delighted that nearly 1,600 people attended the gathering to support the park. The large turnout was even more amazing since a norther hit Saratoga in midmorning dumping sleet and rain on the event. The first annual “Get Together” was a success. The membership list jumped to 358 and the treasury was enriched by over $668.68

As a result of this display of support, Henley’s confidence grew. Since he was finally nearing completion of the Big Thicket Study Committee report, he wrote Governor Connally asking for an opportunity to present his findings and recommendations. An appointment was made with the governor for March 24, 1965. Before making his report to Connally, Henley presented a rough draft to ex-Governor Daniel and solicited his comments. Next, he wrote the members of the Study Committee and established a meeting to review the findings before printing them in final form. Following their apathetic pattern, only a few members of the committee attended the meeting. Finally, Henley presented his report to the Big Thicket Association and gained its endorsement for his recommendations.69
On March 24, Henley and over 250 Big Thicket supporters journeyed to Austin to present the report to Connally. The Big Thicket report called for six separate components totaling 52,200 acres. The first component was a 2,000-acre addition to the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation. The second section of the park was simply a 200-acre camping area adjacent to the reservation. A third section designated 10,000 acres near the small community of Fuqua as a Big Thicket State Forest. This region was to be honeycombed with nature trails, riding paths, and foot trails. Primitive overnight camping would be allowed in the forest area.

The report also recommended the establishment of a wildlife and wilderness area of at least 15,000 acres around the Sour Lake-Saratoga region. The plan called for the area to be restocked with bear, panther, moose, buffalo, and English boar. Hunting and access by automobile would be restricted in this area. Henley further proposed an additional 25,000-acre buffer zone around the wildlife area. This land would be leased from the timber firms. Selective logging, under the close scrutiny of the state, would be allowed in the buffer zone. Timber firms were to receive a reasonable tax adjustment in return for the land lease. A park headquarters, located at Saratoga, rounded out the park plan. These areas were to be connected by scenic easements. In summation, Henley called on the executive branch to introduce immediately a park bill into the legislature.

Connally thanked Henley for the report, but remained noncommittal about the proposed park. One month after the presentation he wrote to Henley restating his interest in a Big Thicket State Park. However, he voiced doubt if the legislature would be able to act on a park bill in its current session. Instead of agreeing to introduce a bill, Connally suggested the establishment of a Legislative Study Committee to investigate the possibilities of a park. The governor claimed such a committee would generate needed public support for the park plan.

Henley and the other members of the Big Thicket Association were disappointed by the governor’s reaction. Nevertheless, the Association continued to publicize the need for a park. The group decided to hold a second Big Thicket “Get Together” in June 1965, to manufacture more support for its program. The celebration was a smashing success and drew over 4,500 people. Even with this outpouring of public support, the state
government did not act. The Association, for all its efforts, had failed to generate enough political support to push a Big Thicket Park bill through the Texas Legislature. Nor had the Association been able to gain the approval of the large timber firms for a park. As Henley stated, “We were just more or less witnessing among ourselves.”

The Association finally realized that additional pressure would have to be applied to jar the state from its apathetic position. In order to apply this pressure, Henley invited Senator Ralph Yarborough to tour the Big Thicket in October 1965. At the time, Yarborough and Connally were bitter political enemies, fighting for the control of the state Democratic Party. Yarborough led the liberal-labor element of the party, while Connally represented the conservative-business oriented segment of the Democrats. Henley hoped to make the Big Thicket an issue of contention between the two men, and thus force either state or federal action on the park plan. Yarborough accepted the invitation, and on October 8, 1965, the senator began a much publicized tour of the Big Thicket.