Saving the Big Thicket

Cozine Jr., James J., Gunter, Pete A. Y.

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Cozine Jr., James J. and Pete A. Y. Gunter.

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What follows is an effort to complete James Cozine’s narrative, taking off roughly from the point at which he ends his account and bringing it up to the present time. To write such a concluding narrative is to confront serious problems. The creation of the Big Thicket National Preserve was a single event, one which tied together innumerable strands of history. The development of the Preserve was, and is, a many-sided series of events, which branch out, grow, and only occasionally interact. In the first case, one has many strands of history becoming a single strand; in the second, one has the Preserve becoming many strands of events.

It would seem at first glance that these events could be approached as a simple chronology: that is, as a series of dates of significant events listed according to the order in which they took place. The apparent simplicity of such a rubric, however, conceals its weakness. The history of the Big Thicket National Preserve is too complex to be constructed as a single series. Too many of its factors are contemporaneous, taking place at the same time but without affecting each other. Too many take place in areas outside the Preserve. Too many culminate at different times—if they do indeed culminate. All of these must be described in the present essay. Their sheer diversity in time, place, and character forbids their being nailed down on a “time line.” Inevitably what follows must be like the Neches River: a
free-flowing stream with definite beginnings, but with many loops, bends, and cutoff channels along the way.

It is useful to begin with a moral, or at least a practical admonition. Most environmentalists engaged in the effort to “save” something—a forest, river, or mountain—believe that once the feature in question is set aside, the task is over. Thus one would: 1. Get possession of the land. 2. Put a fence around it. 3. Put up a no entrance sign. Nothing, however, is farther from the truth. The end of an environmental campaign is the beginning of a phalanx of problems. Some can be quickly solved; some will rankle on for decades. Some will be bureaucratic, some political, some economic. The Big Thicket National Preserve provides examples of all of these. They continue to unroll today, as diverse and tangled as the Big Thicket itself.

1. Bureaucratic Beginnings

When President Gerald R. Ford signed the Big Thicket National Preserve into existence on October 11, 1974, his signature created a paper park. The real one was to be long in the making—far longer than its protagonists could have imagined. The first land purchase was to take place fourteen months later, just before Christmas, 1975. It came not too soon, but too late. As James Cozine points out, though large lumber companies had faithfully observed a moratorium on cutting inside the Preserve, some smaller timber operators continued to log the land in Preserve units. Meanwhile, cutting to control pine beetle infestations caused the felling of extensive stands of pine trees inside the Preserve. The results were dramatic. Timber cutting by small landowners and big lumber companies destroyed some 2500 to 3000 acres of the Preserve. (Some conservationists put the figure as high as 4000 acres.) Not until emergency land purchase bills could be gotten through Congress in 1976 by Congressman Charles Wilson and Senator Lloyd Bentsen was the onslaught halted.

Subsequently, land purchase funding was to move ahead by uneven increments. From a beginning of $7,000,000 in 1976, funding reached $47,000,000 in 1977; $9,000,000 in 1978; $5,000,000 in 1979; $2,100,000 in 1980; $5,100,000 in 1981; and $7,600,000 in 1982. The Beaumont
Enterprise pointed out that at that time (1982) 18% of the Preserve was still unacquired, and no funds were authorized for the current fiscal year.\(^4\) Funding had ceased in 1982 due to a new Land Protection Plan imposed by the Reagan administration. The new plan required that all lands acquired by the National Park Service be subject to extremely stringent accounting procedures.\(^5\) The plan, stigmatized by its detractors as “paralysis through analysis,” managed to slow down but not quite halt land purchase. For the next decade, purchase funds were to be doled out to the Preserve in increments of a million dollars or less. Not until 1992—eighteen years after the creation of the Preserve—was land purchase finally completed.

But the sheer difficulty of finding funding was minor compared to the problems of actually purchasing the separate tracts of land that made up the Preserve. The task of processing these many purchases fell to William Jewell of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. Besides the problem of dealing with a multitude of small land parcels, Jewell found himself, as he recounted to a Texas Lawyer reporter, beset with “a nightmare of convoluted title searches and time-consuming detective work to track down the heirs of long-departed oil field speculators.”\(^6\) Foot-dragging by local title companies and the tendency of landowners to reject government land value estimates and take their cases to court did not make the task any easier.\(^7\) Widely credited with skillful handling of difficult cases and with keeping funding moving in spite of bureaucratic roadblocks, Jewell was given an award in 1994 by the Big Thicket Association.\(^8\)

Meanwhile, other sorts of questions were being posed and struggled with. Whereas earlier components of the National Park System had been set aside for their scenery, the Big Thicket National Preserve—the first biological preserve in the history of the Park Service—had been set aside almost exclusively because of its biology. If this meant that its biological integrity had to be protected, it was nonetheless clear that the public had to be allowed access. Equally challenging, hunting was to be allowed in the Preserve along with oil exploration and recovery. The Preserve’s matrix of often isolated units and sprawling stream corridors further complicated an already complex situation. To deal with this would require a unique mix of wisdom and common sense.
Among the first of these problems was that of boundaries. When the Big Thicket National Preserve was created, its boundaries were depicted only in the most general terms. A long time Thicket environmentalist, Billy Hallmon, took it on himself to drive down from Dallas weekend after weekend and walk the boundaries of Preserve units mapping them step by step, mile after mile, here leaving out a residence or weekend retreat, there including a seep or oxbow lake. He managed this with little more than a topographical map, an ankle-attached yardage gauge, and a hand-held map roller. No one asked him to do it, or paid him, or encouraged him. He simply did it.

Meanwhile, the National Park Service found itself in a quandary. Boundaries had to be established before lands could be bought, but, perennially short on staff and money, NPS found itself unable to begin boundary mapping. Given the nature of bureaucratic mapping, getting the requisite maps would require another year—or two, or three. Preserve superintendent Tom Lubbert solved the problem. Bringing the massive federal establishment with him, he accepted Billy’s maps, which with some corrections are those of the present Preserve.

What was to be allowed within these boundaries was to emerge from a seemingly endless series of NPS public meetings, studies, plans and statements. The most important of these were, in order: (1976) Final Environmental Statement, (1977) Proposal and Assessment Visitor Use and General Development, (1979) Wilderness Study, (1979) Land Acquisition Plan, (1980) General Management Plan, (1980) Wilderness Recommendations, (1983) Management Plan, and (1988) Fire Management Plan. Once a plan is completed and filed, it is then subjected to periodic updates. The process of updating continues indefinitely.

As the series of studies and updates took form, the National Park Service began creating trails in the Preserve. In 1978, an Information Center (a log cabin next to a parking lot) was opened at the foot of the Turkey Creek Unit. This was to be the Preserve’s de facto visitor center until a full-fledged visitor center opened to the public on October 6, 2001. The causes of the twenty-five year wait for this center were many and will be discussed below.

Not until 1978 was the first trail opened in the Preserve. It was the first nine miles of the Turkey Creek Trail, at the north end of the Turkey
Creek Unit, far removed from the visitor’s center at the unit’s south end. In 1979, the Beech Wood Trail opened in the Beech Creek Unit, and in 1980 the Sundew Trail opened in the Hickory Creek Unit. In 1983 the Youth Conservation Corps began construction of the Woodlands Trail in the Big Sandy Unit. This trail was completed the following year, as were the accessible loop on the Sundew Trail and a similar loop on the Pitcher Plant Trail, in the north part of the Turkey Creek Unit. The Woodlands Trail was completed in 1990 by the addition of the Big Sandy Horse Trail. This trail system was now nine miles long and was available for hiking, all-terrain bicycling, and horseback riding. In 1991, the Boy Scouts opened a path (the Birdwatcher’s Trail) to the confluence of Menard Creek and the Trinity River. This half-mile-long trail offers a panoramic view of broad sandbars on the Trinity River from high bluffs on its east side. The Preserve’s over forty miles of trails sketched above have subsequently been added to by the 1.5 mile Beaver Slide Trail in the southeast corner of the Big Sandy Unit. In the future, an R. E. Jackson Trail will traverse the Big Sandy Unit from west to east. This trail, blazed by the Big Thicket Association, is already partly completed. A Bear Trail is projected for the Lance Rosier Unit. It will utilize the old Lance Rosier homesite. The NPS has been able to install picnic facilities at the entrances to several of these trails.

The facts presented so far do not complete the Preserve’s bureaucratic agenda. Among the other things that it has been called on to do (again, with insufficient personnel) is to administer hunting and trapping within its boundaries. Hunting permits began to be given out in 1980; trapping permits became available soon after. It would be nice to be able to say that all went smoothly. Permits were originally given equally to all comers, producing a situation in which outside hunters far outnumbered local ones. In the beginning, also, local people were not effectively informed about how to obtain hunting permits. Uncertainty over the differences between federal and state hunting regulations added further confusion. Geraldine Watson recounts that local people became bitter about the situation—some nearly to the point of violence. The Park Service discovered that it had to change its stripes:
Each year, changes for the better were made in the hunting program. Registration was held in a public school nearest the unit involved and permits given on a first-come, first-serve basis, which gave the locals an edge. Aside from a few diehards who want everything to be as it was in the old days, people seem to be satisfied with the program.21

The Park Service’s willingness to change its ways did improve feelings among the locals. But it can not be denied that a residue of resentment remains.

In the midst of these projects, Preserve superintendents and their staffs managed to find time and resources to fund scientific studies of the Preserve’s plant growth communities, rare, scarce, and endangered species, archaeological sites, birds, reptiles, mammals, as well as the impact, potential and actual, of oil and gas development. Policies for prescribed burning had to be worked out in the midst of sometimes heated controversies among environmentalists.22 Payments in lieu of taxes needed to be worked out for counties deprived of tax revenues through federal land purchase.23

Even this long list of projects barely scratches the surface. Just how much more the Preserve leadership and staff were called on to do is revealed by a speech given in January 1992 to the Big Thicket Association by then-Preserve superintendent Ron Switzer. Switzer stated: 1. Methamphetamine labs on floating houseboats were turning up on Preserve streams. These were being policed by NPS personnel, as were occasional marijuana patches discovered in the woods. Insufficient personnel made it especially hard to police far-flung corridors and units. In 1982 the Preserve had 36 personnel; in 1992 it had 37. 2. Thirty water samples were being taken every two weeks throughout the Preserve. This and the maintenance of an air quality measuring station (in the Turkey Creek Unit) required trained personnel. 3. Because of these factors and because of its sheer complexity, the Big Thicket was a natural training ground for the National Park Service. Unfortunately, once trained, personnel tended to move on, and the Preserve has had to undertake more hiring and training. 4. Environmental education was now a required part of K through 12 curricula in Texas. The Preserve had begun an environmental education program, which, though
it received an award from the Environmental Educators of Texas, was still in an embryonic state. 5. The Preserve Visitor Center (he stated optimistically) should begin construction over the next few months. The National Park Service would pay most of the costs for water and gas lines to be installed between the Center and Kountze, to the south. This, happily, put NPS out of the water and the gas business. 6. The church across from the Visitor Center bought four acres next to it to keep a Big Thicket McDonald’s from moving in next door. Because of an old railroad right of way, the State of Texas would control frontage on the west side of U. S. Highway 69. Keeping the area around the Visitor Center “green” will be a big problem. 7. Current estimations for nesting pairs of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker were eight (perhaps nine, given reports of a pair in the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit). 8. The Big Thicket was “the best kept secret in Southeast Texas.” Efforts were being made to publicize it through a traveling exhibit, a new tabloid (sponsored by Chevron Oil), a new handbook, and articles in regional media. 9. The Preserve was beginning to rely on and to train volunteers as nature interpreters. 10. Land was beginning to be donated to the Preserve. At that time twenty acres of beautiful cypress sloughs on Pine Island Bayou and another 140-acre plot were in negotiation. 11. Pending legislation (S.1105) to add the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor to the Preserve was stalled in congressional committee. 12. The Preserve might be forced to take up drug education in its five-county area. 13. The last 244 acres of the Preserve were about to be purchased. Problems of multiple ownership had delayed the process.24

Listeners marveled that Switzer was able to cover all of these issues—and others on which he touched—in less than an hour. They were equally struck by the magnitude of the tasks that the National Park Service set itself, and the degree to which it managed to keep up with them, understaffed and underfunded as it was.

2. Beyond Bureaucracy

Saving Pine Island Bayou and Keeping the Neches River Free

To deal with the “bureaucratic” side of a natural area is to deal primarily (though not even in this case exclusively) with factors inside the area. But
if, as John Donne said, no man is an island, then neither is a natural area. Each is situated in a natural and social context that has a very real effect on any island, man, or park. Increasingly, as stated above, attention must be focused on surrounding areas and their effect. This would turn out to be true especially of the stream corridors in and near the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Pine Island Bayou is a peculiar stream. In dry months it and its tributary, Little Pine Island Bayou, consist through their upper reaches of little more than tea-colored water holes strung between low-lying flats of baked black clay. If any alligators live in the upper course of these streams, they must be highly accomplished walkers. Even in their lower reaches, where sluggish dark water flows year-round, these streams seem more like small creeks than bayous. But these appearances are misleading. Tropical storms, thunderstorms, and stalled cold fronts have been known to dump massive rains of ten to twenty inches in a day. These hundred-year floods, which occur every fifteen to twenty years in the region, turn low flats of palmetto palm and live oak into one-half to one-mile-wide moving swamps. To build a home in such areas is to court misery, even if the home is built on stilts: a point real estate developers have been slow to recognize.

Much of the upstream region of Pine Island and Little Pine Island Bayou lies outside the Preserve. But Little Pine Island Bayou lies within the Lance Rosier Unit and Pine Island Bayou from its confluence with Little Pine Island Bayou in the Rosier Unit to its intersection with the Neches River is a Preserve corridor. The bayous and their deep wooded palmetto flats are thus an integral part of the Thicket, and what happens to them is a matter of particular concern to environmentalists. Though the bayous and their swampy watersheds are implausible places to build subdivisions, they remain tantalizingly close to Beaumont. The result has been the growth of exurbanite communities along their banks. The two largest and most important of these are Bevil Oaks and Pinewoods. Upscale and well kept, these clubhouse communities have a simple drawback: they flood. They flood often and well.

It was understandable—entirely predictable—that the residents of these and other nearby areas would soon join in a chorus of protest against their flood-prone predicament. Beginning in 1967 and reemerging in 1975,
1979, and 1995, the streamside communities pleaded for help from local government, and then from the Texas legislature. This would involve cutting trees and brush along the bayou, removing sunken logs and tree trunks, and straightening (i.e. ditching) its looping bends. One spokesperson for the embattled exurbanites insisted that the problem could only be solved by building a dam upstream on the Neches River (the Rockland Dam, to be discussed below). Professional opinion was far from encouraging for these projects. In 1976, the U. S. Corps of Engineers had done a “reconnaissance” of the area, and in 1985 completed a much more elaborate feasibility study. Both concluded that no “economically feasible structural or non-structural means” of reducing flooding on the Pine Island Bayou watershed existed. Another way of putting the matter would be to say that any conceivable way of halting flooding in the low, poorly drained area would be exorbitantly expensive, costing many times over the value of the affected subdivisions.

The citizens of Pinewood and Bevil Oaks, however, were adamant. The question of flood control continued to be debated by their representatives in the newspapers and on television, and in 1995 bills to create a Pine Island Bayou Stormwater District were forwarded to the legislature by State Representative Zeb Zbranik and State Senator Michael Galloway. Zbranik’s bill passed, but Galloway’s was “tagged” at the last minute (i.e. prevented by other senators from being brought to the floor for a vote). If the issue died a temporary death, it was resurrected in 1997, when on March 25 and 26 Galloway reintroduced his bill of two years before (now SB 1899) and Zbranik reintroduced his own (now HB 3546). Both bills quickly passed and were signed into law by Governor Bush.

The lines were now drawn. On one side stood the conservationists, the National Park Service (which, however, could not actively interfere with the election), and the lumber companies, who stood to lose acreage to flood control cutting and ditching. On the other side stood homeowners, their friends and allies, including potential real estate developers. Jeannie Turk, realtor and spokesperson for the Pine Island Bayou Flood Committee, pleaded that her constituents had a right to live wherever they wanted to live, and that their homes and property values were threatened by seri-
ous flooding. Did local people want a local entity representing them on issues that affected them, or did they want state and federal agencies representing them? In response Dorothy Griffin, former manager of the Lumberton Chamber of Commerce and spokesperson for the Pine Island Bayou Tax Prevention Committee, said that the stormwater district would impose a new layer of taxes, duplicating those already imposed for local drainage districts, that it would impose a new layer of bureaucracy on top of already existing bureaucracy, and that it would levy taxes on people whose homes would be unaffected by potential flooding. On top of that, the district would not be able to halt floods.  

Scheduled for January 17, 1998, the election was forestalled by lawsuits filed by timber companies (chiefly Louisiana-Pacific) protesting the siting of voting places at the far southern end of the drainage district (at Pinewood, Bevil Oaks, and Daisetta). This siting was, they argued, clearly designed to limit voting only to those immediately affected, and not to the voters of the drainage district as a whole. The suits were successful. After continued legal sparring, the elections were held on November 3.

Interestingly, efforts to predict the results were few, and guarded. If anyone had a crystal ball, it seems to have remained clouded. Stormwater district proponents trumpeted impending victory. Environmentalists and their allies said little. If anything, a pall of gloom had settled over the environmental camp. The “us against the Big Guys who are pushing us around” rhetoric of the stormwater spokesmen had a profound appeal to the local people. It had swayed them often before. But when the results came in, the figures were astonishing. Just over two thousand votes (2078) were registered for the district while almost six thousand (5835) were against it: a ratio of three to one. Still more surprising, the stormwater district carried Bevil Oaks and Pinewood by only the narrowest of margins. To almost everyone’s surprise, ditching, timbering, and swampland development—and a new round of taxes—had been roundly defeated.

No sooner had the threat to the bayous been removed, than a new threat emerged, this time on the Neches River. If Big and Little Pine Island Bayous are small meandering streams, the Neches is clearly a river: broad, free flowing, and powerful. The Big Thicket National Preserve encompasses a 72-mile as-the-crow-flies corridor stretching from Dam B
(Steinhagen Reservoir) on the north to the Beaumont Country Club to the south. This corridor contains three Preserve units: Jack Gore Baygall Unit, Neches Bottom Unit, and the Beaumont Unit. In its course from Dam B to Beaumont, the Neches rolls through three distinct regions: a northern section in which swift-running water courses between high wooded bluffs, a middle section where banks begin to subside and slow waters begin to deposit their sediments, and a southern section that is far flatter, more alluvial, and increasingly swampy. Particularly in the lower two sections, the river floodplain is carved into terraces. Each terrace sustains its own distinctive plant growth communities. All are dependent on annual river floods, which keep them wet and prevent the intrusion of dryland species. If flooding were halted, these areas would be significantly transformed.

This, of course, portended a problem. Though Dam B does limit flooding downstream on the Neches, it is a comparatively small dam with a minimal impact. The U. S. Corps of Engineers, however, had projected a second, larger dam farther north on the Neches, the Rockland Dam and Reservoir. This structure would inundate at least 110,000 acres of hardwood bottomland forests, would effectively end the Neches’ career as a wild, free-flowing river, and would significantly affect downstream water flow through the Big Thicket National Preserve corridor and its three units.

Beginning in 1983, the Big Thicket Association started a drive to deauthorize the Rockland Reservoir, taking it off the Corps of Engineers list of potential projects. The drive was led by Billy Hallmon, at that time president of the Big Thicket Association. Because the dam had never been funded, it was eligible for inclusion in section 12 of Public Law 93-251, the Federal Water Resources Development Act of 1974. The actual process of deauthorization, however, was as tangled and Byzantine as any procedure in the federal bureaucracy. Each year the Chief of the U. S. Corps of Engineers prepares a list of from five to six hundred water projects acceptable for deauthorization, and then chooses a small number of these to be deauthorized. In doing this he has to consult with the states in which the projects were located and forward written comments to the Secretary of the Army, who could halt any deauthorization he might choose to halt.
The end result of this withering process was then sent to the public works committees of the House and Senate where, again, any item could be removed from the list. After ninety days any deauthorization that had not been shot down in the meantime was automatically considered put into law. Amazingly, each year some projects actually did get deauthorized by this process.\textsuperscript{39} It is hard to imagine how.

There was an alternative to this labyrinthine scheme: direct congressional action. Given the ease with which legislation can be killed off in Congress, however, this at first seemed the most unlikely path. On June 26, 1983, Billy Hallmon sent a letter to the Corps of Engineers requesting that the Rockland Dam be officially included in the deauthorization process.\textsuperscript{40}

If this move started the glacial deauthorization plan in motion, the motion was immediately interrupted. In 1984, the Texas Department of Water Resources had come out in favor of using federal funding to construct Rockland Reservoir.\textsuperscript{41} The TDWR, in turn, had been prodded into action by the Lower Neches River Authority, which in 1982 had urged the creation of the federally funded dam.\textsuperscript{42} In spite of persistent prodding by Congressman Wilson, the deauthorization process was stalled by state and local resistance. On March 19, 1987, the congressman, tired of waiting, introduced a bill into Congress to deauthorize Rockland Dam.\textsuperscript{43} HR 1747 was referred to the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation, where it languished unmoved for two years. Finally the congressman, late in 1989, attached his bill as an obscure and unnoticed amendment to an omnibus bill. The omnibus bill sailed out of committee, was passed by Congress and made into law. On January 1, 1990, the Rockland Dam and Reservoir was officially deauthorized.\textsuperscript{44}

This, of course ended the matter, precisely in the way that the Treaty of Versailles ended future wars in Europe. The Lower Neches Valley Authority, which had originally urged federal funding for the Rockland Dam, soon urged that the project be supported not by federal but by state funding. The LNVA’s move was to be promoted by the East Texas Water Planning Group, one of sixteen regional water planning groups in the state.\textsuperscript{45} In June 2000 the East Texas Water Planning Group proposed the creation of thirteen reservoirs in East Texas, impounding a total of 290,000 acres.
Among these was the Rockland Dam and Reservoir at a conservatively estimated cost of $700,000,000. So significantly was the proposal regarded that it elicited an editorial in the *Beaumont Enterprise* and an extensive article in the *Houston Chronicle*.

Environmentalists, awakened from their momentary happiness, responded with pointed criticisms. The proposed dam, they noted, would involve the condemnation of over 150,000 acres of prime timberland, cost not the projected figure but over a billion dollars when completed, and seriously disrupt water flow downstream. One environmentalist, Richard Donovan of Lufkin, canoed down 200 miles of the Neches in October 1999, describing the beauty of the primitive back country and arguing that the Neches should be declared a National Wild and Scenic River. Such a status, of course, would preclude the creation of any further dams along its length. The idea of a National Wild and Scenic River on the Neches (or of a National Recreational River) began to be seriously developed by conservationists and attracted favorable interest by the newly elected congressman for the district, Democrat Jim Turner.

But just at that moment, as environmentalists and water interests steeled themselves for a very long, hard, noisy battle, a strange silence settled over the Piney Woods. Local people, interestingly, were letting it be known far and wide that they wanted no more reservoirs and, given the chance, would vote against them. Conservationists, caught unaware by the stillness, looked elsewhere for problems to address (and managed to find them). Water interests withdrew and bided their time. Meanwhile, in the background, moves were being made which would change the future of the Neches River. In July 2003, a projected purchase of 33,000 acres of prime timber in the Neches River bottomland was announced. This acreage, purchased from International Paper, lies directly in the path of the proposed Rockland Reservoir and renders its future construction extremely unlikely. The purchase, arranged by the National Land and Conservation Fund, was supported by the Meadows Foundation, the T. L. L. Temple Foundation, and Renewable Resources, LLC. This last plans to manage the area as sustainable production hardwood forest until it can be turned over to public ownership. The land segment, which connects the Davy Crockett National Forest and the
Angelina National Forest, will possibly become part of a Neches River National Wildlife Refuge.

The defeat of efforts to ditch, timber, and de-snag Pine Island and Little Pine Island Bayou was unexpected and, exactly to that degree, dramatic. The creation of a new bottomland wilderness and the simultaneous halting of plans to put a major dam on the Neches River were less dramatic, precisely because events in this case moved quietly and the new wilderness was announced without fanfare. The results, however, were even more astonishing. At one stroke, a vast stretch of land was left wild. And a river—the last such river in East Texas—was left free. It could be hard to believe that such things are possible.

3. A Wider Big Thicket
Parks, Donations, and a New Center

So far this essay has recounted the “bureaucratic” creation of the Big Thicket National Preserve and struggles to defend the area streams that feed into the Preserve and also are part of it. What follows is an expansion of scope. It is a description of the many subsequent additions to the Preserve as well as to the broad area surrounding it. These additions, it will be argued, broaden the very concept of the Big Thicket Preserve. Inevitably one is drawn from thinking of it as one ecological reality to conceiving it as the center of a broad, sprawling Big Thicket Environmental Area.

When the Preserve was created in 1974, it contained all the basic plant growth communities in the Thicket but one. The community not included was the “arid sandland” community, which, though it contained ponds, floodplains and bogs, sits on one- to three-hundred-feet-deep sand deposits. Abundant rainfall there immediately sinks downward, leaving a dry land of dwarfed pine trees, cacti, and West Texas wildflowers. To complete the catalogue of plant growth communities, in 1977 Temple-Eastex (now Temple-Inland) donated 2138 acres of arid sandland to The Nature Conservancy, a national environmental organization mentioned several times in this essay. This tract (the Larsen Sanctuary) lies on the east side of Village Creek and runs from FM418 on the north to FM327 on the south: an easy one-day canoe trip. A 40-acre donation in 1978 by Gulf
State Utilities and a subsequent donation in 1985 by Sun Oil were added to by a Temple-Inland donation in 1991 along FM418. Purchase of several smaller tracts by The Nature Conservancy in 1990 and 1991 brought the total size of the sanctuary to 2400 acres.51

But this was not to be the end. In 1994, Temple-Inland conveyed to The Nature Conservancy an additional 380.15 acres on the west side of Village Creek along with an additional 2800-acre “conservation easement” also on the creek’s west side. This brought the size of the sanctuary to 5,600 acres: larger than many of the Preserve units and a vital addition to them.52

There is more than a little irony in this consummation. The struggle to bring Village Creek into the Preserve in the 1970s had very nearly cost the Preserve its existence. Now an extensive sanctuary had been created on the creek, and by a timber company. But this was not to be the end of the Adventure of Village Creek. At almost the same time as the Larsen Sanctuary was announced, the Village Creek State Park of 1004 acres was opened on the creek to the south, near Lumberton.53 This park, with its two-mile creek frontage, would be developed for camping in its upland areas while its low areas would remain undeveloped.54 In January 2001, an additional 45 acres (predominantly longleaf pine upland) were added to the park.55

Big Sandy-Village Creek, though not in the Preserve as such, now boasted five protected areas along its sixty-mile length: the Big Sandy Unit, the foot of the Turkey Creek Unit, the Larsen Sanctuary, Village Creek State Park, and the confluence of the creek with the Lower Neches Corridor. It remained to be seen whether more sanctuaries could be added to it, or whether a Big Thicket Addition Bill could bring the whole creek under protection. The unending effort to pass a Big Thicket Addition Bill in Congress will be considered below—at great length.

If this, for the time being, ended the acquisition of land along Village Creek and in the lower Neches drainage basin generally, it did not halt acquisition of new state parks east of the Neches, and on (and west of) the Trinity. The only place where the Big Thicket Preserve directly touches the Trinity River is at the confluence of the Trinity and the Preserve’s Menard Creek Corridor. But in 1983 Texas State Parks and Wildlife ac-
quired the 1734-acre Davis Hill State Park, twelve miles south of the Menard Corridor on the west bank of the river. This picturesque park sits on a salt dome rising 210 feet above low, swampy bottomlands. The park's elevation makes for beautiful views, and creates microhabitats supporting some rare and some unusual plant species.

During the time (roughly from 1964 to 1974) when conservationists and lumber interests were quarreling over the creation and location of the Big Thicket National Preserve, a quiet gentleman’s agreement was reached between the combatants. That is, it was agreed to concentrate only on the land between the Trinity River and the Neches River. Neither party had the energy or the resources to fight over outlying areas. (This in spite of the fact that most parties agreed that the “Thicket” sprawled west to the San Jacinto River and east, with interruptions, to the Sabine River.) With the creation of Lake Houston State Park (4917 acres) in the San Jacinto River drainage basin and Tony Houseman State Park (4919 acres) on the Sabine River, the arbitrary Trinity-Neches Barrier was transgressed. Now it became possible to think about the Big Thicket throughout its length.

In 1994, ten years after the creation of Davis Hill State Park on the Trinity, a new and unexpected environmental presence came to the river. From just south of the Lake Livingston Dam (approximately 12 1/2 crowflight miles northwest of the Menard Creek Corridor) to and beyond SH90 to the south, the Trinity flows for over 45 straightline miles through wild, tangled deep-southern bottomland, which in spite of a scattering of oil wells, occasional weekend subdivisions, and cattle pastures, remains virtually uninhabited. Except for the proposed Tanner Bayou Unit on the west side of the river not far south of the dam, none of this area had seriously been considered for inclusion in the Big Thicket National Preserve. Its wild/semiwild status, its vast size, and its complex of diverse habitats and plant growth communities, however, made it a natural candidate for some kind of environmental protection. So did its economic value, which often involved the production of income only sufficient for payment of gradually increasing taxes.

The new environmental presence came in the form not of the National Park Service or Texas State Parks and Wildlife, but of the National Fish and Wildlife Service. The result would be the Trinity River National
Wildlife Refuge. Acquisition of the wildlife refuge was to be piecemeal. The initial land purchase (purchase from willing sellers, not through condemnation) came to 4,400 acres: an area just to the south of and at some points directly adjacent to the Davis Hill State Park. From 1994 through April 2002, parcels of 900, 1500, 600, 1200, 100, 200, and 3100 acres were added to the refuge, bringing the total size to 12,900 acres. As of September 2003, total refuge size had risen to 18,000 acres. Original projections for the TRWR ranged from as low as 20,000 to as high as 80,000 or more acres. The future extent of the refuge is at this moment uncertain. It does seem that the final figure will transcend the minimum figure of 20,000 acres.

Meanwhile, a collection of smaller wild areas were added to the tally, some near (in fact, some directly adjacent to) the Preserve, others far from it. These came from very different sources and had quite different statuses. The first to be sketched here are those that derive from private organizations. Formally dedicated in July 1978, the 40-acre Dujay Sanctuary, contiguous with the northeast section of the Lance Rosier Unit, will be used by Lamar University for educational and scientific purposes. The Nature Conservancy of Texas currently owns the Wier Woods Preserve of 106 acres near Lumberton, the 43-acre J. Cooke and Mary Randolph Wilson Preserve in the north Beaumont city limits near Pine Island Bayou, and the 49-acre Big Thicket Bogs and Pinelands on U. S. Highway 69 near Warren. In addition, the Natural Area Preservation Association (affiliated with the Texas Committee on Natural Resources) has donated 12 acres to the Marysee Prairie, west of Saratoga, and in 1998 came into possession of the 254-acre Gum Bayou Preserve near Liberty and the 69.6-acre J. H. McAfee Preserve in Tyler County east of Woodville.

To these areas (totaling 574 acres) must be added a very odd wildland, created by the Hardin County Commissioners Court in August 1997. From Saratoga, Texas, a county road runs due north to the abandoned village of Bragg, on FM1293. The road, which follows a former logging railroad spur, is surrounded with a mystery. Many years ago a drunken railroad worker was said to have lain down on the railroad track and had his head cut off by a passing locomotive. Since then a strange light has been seen drifting along the road: the ghost, it is said, of the workman looking for his lost
head by lantern light. The pencil-straight thoroughfare has come to be called the “Ghost Road.” People have come for many years to look for the ghost. For several years the Big Thicket Association sponsored walks on the road at midnight and even gave out t-shirts proclaiming the bravery of those willing to make the trek.

The problem was that the road and its right of way belonged to the county, which periodically threatened to cut the timber that flourished there. The value of the timber has been estimated as high as $86,000—no small sum for a county with a slender tax base. \(^65\) Gradually, however, the value of the road as a historical icon and a tourist attraction began to win converts, who organized and put pressure on the county judges. \(^66\) After many meetings, petitionings, and well-publicized hikes by local groups, the Hardin County Commissioners in 1997 created the Ghost Road Scenic Drive County Park. In the words of Commissioner Ken Pelt, the Ghost Road Planning Committee was charged with working out a “long-range plan for the maintenance, use, and development of Ghost Road”. \(^67\) The Big Thicket now boasted a 100-acre nature preserve eight miles long and 110 feet wide. \(^68\)

Many other areas have been set aside. They are both farther than the Ghost Road from the Preserve and by far less dramatic. In the western reaches of the Big Thicket the Natural Area Protection Association established the 74-acre Winter’s Bayou Protective Addition in 1991 and 1994. The Houston Audubon Society has also set aside 130.6 acres on Winter’s Bayou and more recently has established the 517-acre Damuth Sanctuary. Of equal size and importance is the Houston Outdoor Nature Club’s aptly named 665-acre Little Thicket Sanctuary. \(^69\) All of these areas are in or near the southeast section of the Sam Houston National Forest and constitute a kind of Western Big Thicket Nature Complex. It would be pleasant to report that the organizations interested in maintaining this complex are concerned with working out interrelations among its components (that is, stream corridors, game trails, scenic easements). Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case.

Finally, there are the additions to the Preserve itself. These are many, and to deal with them all is, unfortunately, to indulge in a long, not overwhelmingly exciting list. (That is, the listing is not exciting; the nature and value of the added areas is.) In rough chronological order the addi-
tions are: 42.37 acres in 1978 by Amoco Production; 10 acres in 1983 by Conoco, Inc.; 12.76 acres in 1994 by the Big Thicket Association; and 1.86 acres in 1995 by the Charles G. Hooks Estate. All of these areas are in or near the Lance Rosier Unit. In 1992 Rebecca Ann Best gave 47.5 acres along Pine Island Bayou to the Preserve, and two years later Mrs. Richard Monro donated 22.98 acres on Village Creek. This botanically rich area, originally the Magnolia Garden Club’s Winfred Turner Sanctuary, will be included in the Village Creek Corridor. In 1994 the board of Magnolia Petroleum gave 23.54 acres on the Menard Creek Corridor, and in 2000 the Citgo Pipeline Company donated 26.20 acres to the Beaumont Unit. In 2002 the Lower Neches Valley Authority gave two parcels of land north-east of the Beaumont Unit totaling 361.32 acres. This acreage was given in “mitigation” for a saltwater barrier constructed on the Neches River south of the Beaumont Unit. To these parcels should be added 13.10 acres given by John Blair to increase the size of the proposed Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center. As this is written, a 22-acre tract near the Beech Creek Unit is being considered for acceptance by the Preserve. The approximate total of all these additions is 560 acres.

This section must end with a bit of arithmetic, and with a pointed admonition. When the acreage of the Larsen Preserve (5600) is added to the acreage donated directly to the Preserve (560), one has a figure of 6160 acres. When this sum is added to that of the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge (18,000 acres) and to the smaller holdings of private organizations (2,189.6), the figure comes to 26,349.6 acres. The acreage of new state parks (12,619), added to the preceding, sums up to a grand figure of 38,958 acres. This, viewed in itself, appears as a massive area. Some would argue that such an area is a serious subtraction from the land base that underlies East Texas’s economy. When these areas are viewed in their natural context, however, this illusion vanishes. Against the millions of acres that make up southeast Texas, these tens of thousands of acres barely appear against the massive sprawl of prairie and woodland, town and reservoir. They stand out as environmental freckles on the broad face of the land. When each tract is looked at separately, moreover, it turns out that most are of minimal economic value: particularly the swamps, stream corridors, and sandlands. Their best use is not for timbering but for hiking,
fishing, hunting, camping, birdwatching, horseback riding or the simple enjoyment of nature. That is, put in terms of the contemporary rubrics, they are best suited to recreational and environmental tourism. Local businessmen and chambers of commerce are beginning to recognize these factors and take them as an additional base for the area's economy, rather than a threat to it.

Finally, there is the matter of a single very small increment to the environmental tracts of southeast Texas: a mere 28.10 acres at the junction of U.S. Highway 69 and FM420, situated between the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit and the Turkey Creek Unit of the Big Thicket National Preserve. This was, after an endless process, the Preserve's Visitor Center.

All those connected with the Preserve had realized from the beginning that such a facility was needed. Visitors needed to know not only where the Preserve and its units were; they needed to know what they were and why the Preserve was created in the first place. The tiny log cabin at the foot of the Turkey Creek Unit could hand out brochures and conversation, but it could do little more. This hardly oriented the public to the region and its biological richness. Under these conditions it was not surprising that visitation to the Preserve remained low.

As it was with everything connected to the Preserve, the process finally leading to the Visitor Center was to be glacially slow. On October 17, 1984, Public Law 98-489 made it possible for the Park Service to buy the Visitor Center land. In fiscal year 1989 Congressman Wilson was able to get a $450,000 appropriation to do the planning for the center. In 1990 he obtained further planning funds plus $3,097,000 for Phase I construction of maintenance facilities. Preserve superintendent Switzer waxed enthusiastic to a local reporter: “We feel this visitor center is the cornerstone to the future of Hardin County. We want to be partners in the future of the county.” The new complex, he explained, would include not only maintenance facilities but a new visitor's center and the Preserve’s administrative offices, a 13,000-square-foot structure with a massive geodesic dome and geometrical, flat angled roof. All this would be completely built in three years. That is, it would be built by 1992.

Superintendent Switzer, however, failed to reckon with the swampwater temporality and molasses-drip entropy of a Federal bureaucracy. As these
words are written, the administrative offices of the Preserve remain in Beaumont, in rented property. The Visitor Center exists and is open to the public. By a lucky quirk of fate, it was redesigned by architect Bill Nelson of Beaumont, who removed the alien geodesic dome and sloping jet wing roof, replacing them with a building reminiscent both of a log cabin and of a Southern plantation home, veranda and all. The Center now “fits” its surroundings, physical and historical.

That it exists at all is a function of local determination. In 1999 the Kountze Economic Development Corporation pledged $150,000 from local tax funds towards the construction of the Visitor Center, with a promise to raise $200,000 in additional funds. Though by early May 2000 they had been able to raise only an additional $47,500, this was enough to break the logjam. On May 13, 2000, Congressman Jim Turner’s office was able to announce an additional $300,000 in funding to add to $530,250 already budgeted by the National Park Service. The final amount raised by the Kountze Economic Development Corporation was $330,000. Thus on October 6, 2001, only 26 years after the creation of the Preserve and almost a decade after its announcement to the world as a fait accompli, the Visitor Center was dedicated.

Meanwhile another center—a scientific research center—was also taking form. It began as an idea in the mind of Maxine Johnston, a past president of the Big Thicket Association and editor of the Big Thicket Reporter. Over a generation earlier when the BTNP was being created, one of the primary arguments in its favor was its scientific and educational value. This belief had led to two Big Thicket Science conferences, the first in Beaumont, October 1996, the second in the same city in October 1999. The proceedings of both were published in special issues of the Texas Journal of Science. Such conferences were useful. But a facility was needed to which scientists and their students could come to pursue their research. Though no such structure existed, a possibility, on the grounds of the Big Thicket Association in Saratoga, did exist. As James Cozine notes in his narrative, these grounds were bought originally by the Big Thicket Association. They consisted of an old brick school building, a wooden gymnasium, and a construction brick-and-tile cafeteria. Broken into by vandals and leached
by rain, the school building had to be taken down. Later the gym (which
one wit insisted, stood erect only because the termites were holding hands
to keep it standing) had to be disassembled also. That left the cafeteria,
which, though it had served as a Big Thicket Museum, was showing signs
of advanced old age.

Though it seemed hard to imagine that the cafeteria, with its peeling
paint, antique roof, and cracked, dusty windows, could serve as an upscale
research center, the scarcely imaginable soon began to take shape. In July
1999 the National Park Foundation and Georgia Pacific jointly awarded a
$60,000 grant towards the project. This was to be followed by a $5000
grant by the Crawford family, a $1000 grant by the Foundation for South-
est Texas, and by a succession of grants from the Meadows Foundation
($74,000), the Brown Foundation ($67,000) and the Magnolia Garden
Club ($6,000). The end result, achieved with overlapping, not always
consistent construction projects, is a spacious, clean structure with meet-
ing rooms, a kitchen, scientific research areas, men’s and women’s dormi-
tories and restroom-shower facilities, and a large entry room equipped with
sofas, chairs, and library tables.

If the Visitor Center opened on one day, the Research Center was to
have many openings before its completion. In its first year, study groups
from Rice University, the University of Texas at Austin, Tarleton College,
the University of North Texas, and the University of Illinois were able to
utilize the Research Center. When the Center’s construction projects
were finally completed, it was at last able to open officially. This was with-
out photo-ops, fanfare, or the waving of flags. Perhaps this was because it
had not taken decades to achieve.

This account of additions to Big Thicket National Preserve and to the
areas around it does not pretend to completeness. For the last four years
the author has attempted to put together a “map atlas” of all preserves,
parks, hiking trails, and wilderness areas in southeast Texas. These include
county parks, city hiking trails, city wildlands, private preserves, and other
kinds of protected places. The bizarre unwillingness of most parties in-
volved in these areas to provide maps or plats of their lands has made the
process difficult. So has the behavior of two of the three large timber com-
panies in the area, which, as will be detailed below, ceremoniously set
aside “special,” “unique,” beautiful” natural areas in the Big Thicket Nature Area and then sold them and their surrounding lands, leaving the areas with no secure future or perhaps no future at all. No thoroughgoing map atlas of the Thicket region has been attempted here. The aim has been to provide a broad, factual account of permanent additions to the Big Thicket region.

4. The Big Thicket Addition Act, Corporate Sell-offs, and a New Big Thicket Crisis

James Cozine’s description of the part played by the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor in the struggle to create the Big Thicket National Preserve is convincing. Many were those who did not want its inclusion, both those in or associated with the area timber industry and many of those who simply did not like the idea. Against these protagonists, conservationists pleaded that the creek corridor, which tied together three of the Preserve’s units, was the lifeblood of the Preserve. Even if this were not true, they proclaimed, the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor was not only beautiful, it was one of the best, if not the best, canoeing streams in East Texas. If it were not saved, sooner or later it would be clearcut and/or picked to pieces by real estate speculators.

It was obvious, however, that in trying against all odds to include the creek corridor in the Preserve, conservationists had overreached themselves. In persisting as they had, environmentalists had broken a de facto pact with Congressman Charles Wilson, with whom they had initially agreed to refrain from seeking the corridor. It was quite understandable that the congressman felt betrayed. It was also understandable that the timber companies believed they had already given up more than they should and should not be required to give up more. In the end, the “anti” faction won out. Conservationists relented. The corridor remained unsaved.

But not for long. In 1978, former Senator Ralph Yarborough, irrepressible conservationist that he was, began pressuring Texas State Parks and Wildlife to create a five or six thousand-acre state park on Village Creek. TSP&W did not respond to Yarborough’s very public exhortations, but his repeated pleas could not be ignored indefinitely. The situation was
suddenly punctuated by Congressman Charles Wilson, who urged angrily that Yarborough’s proposal violated the agreement under which the Big Thicket National Preserve had been created. To make his point, he personally excluded $6.1 million of badly needed land purchase funds intended for the Preserve. Once and for all, he had put his foot down. 

He was soon allowed to pick up his foot. A local landowner intervened in the quarrel by informing Texas State Parks and Wildlife that he was willing to sell a sizeable tract of land on Village Creek if it could be turned into a park. Senator Yarborough then stepped back from his advocacy, at least for the time being. Senator Lloyd Bentsen moved in and got the $6.1 million back into the acquisition funding. Conservationists once more relented, and let the creek flow on unperturbed.

That was still not to be the end of the affair, which began to seem unendable. In June 1986, Congressman Wilson ‘s aides began asking stunned conservationists if they would like to see 14,000 acres, including the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor, added to the Preserve. On deep reflection, conservationists decided that this would be a fine idea. So, on October 2, 1986, Wilson introduced HR 5646 to add the Village Creek Corridor (7,000 acres) to the Preserve, as well as to widen the Lower Neches Corridor (an additional 7,000 acres). A year later, on October 22, 1987, he amended his bill (now HR 3544) to include both the Big Sandy Corridor and the Canyonlands, a hilly, stream-cut area on the west bank of the Neches just below Dam B.

There were to be procedural complications: a local hearing (May 21, 1988) and then, on June 4, 1988, a House hearing in Washington, D.C. By now Wilson’s bill had been rechristened HR 919, and tallied exactly 13,000 acres: 6120 in the Big Sandy Corridor, 5088 in the Village Creek Corridor, and 1792 acres in the Canyonlands. In July 1989, Wilson’s bill passed the House. Senator Bentsen then introduced a companion bill (S 1302) in the Senate. On October 24, 1989, hearings were held before the Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands. Opposition stemmed from the National Park Service (which opposed the Big Sandy Corridor) and from local landowners, who opposed losing their weekend cabins.

Then, true to the Big Thicket tradition, a new complication emerged. Newly elected conservative senator Phil Gramm (R-Tex) stepped forward
to oppose the Addition Bill in the Senate, arguing that though he was not categorically opposed to new land for the Preserve, he was not convinced that the idea was acceptable either. Undaunted, Congressman Wilson introduced a new bill (HR 1592), which included the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor, the Canyonland Unit, and, in addition, the Blue Elbow Unit, later to become Tony Houseman State Park. The new proposed unit enlarged Wilson’s bill to 15,105 acres. Bentsen then introduced a bill identical to Wilson’s in the Senate, while Gramm introduced a bill proposing a 10,000-acre addition.

On November 23, 1991, the House of Representatives passed Wilson’s HR 1592. The issue seemed to be moving to a conclusion when a new Senate hearing was held, with both sides agreeing to let their previous testimony reflect their views. Weeks then passed before Bentsen and Gramm could get together to resolve their differences. When they did meet, the result was a 10,000-acre bill (Gramm’s version) with a fateful proviso. Land taken from timber companies to create the addition to the Preserve would have to be traded for land taken from the national forests of Texas. Among other things, this meant that a remarkable degree of cooperation would have to be reached between the Department of the Interior (containing the National Park Service) and the Department of Agriculture (containing the U.S. Forest Service). No such cooperation had been achieved previously.

An ominous pause ensued. While senators held bills hostage until they could get their own bills passed, the compromise Addition Bill lay moribund in committee. On top of this impasse, senators on the committee argued over the precise character of the language in terms of which a land exchange could be managed. On October 8, 1992, after an intense letter-writing, telegram, and telephone campaign by conservationists, the Big Thicket Addition Bill was released from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and passed the Senate. A round of celebrations, all premature, ensued.

In order to make it to the president’s desk for signature, the Addition Bill had to make it through an arcane mechanism termed the “consent calendar,” which allows a skeleton crew of congressmen remaining in Washington while their colleagues return home to campaign, to pass non-
controversial legislation through a unanimous vote. Any congressman could, if he wished, veto a consent bill, but this had never happened in the history of Congress. That is, not until now. William Dannemire (R-Cal), a one-term congressman who had failed in his bid to run for the United States Senate from California and who told reporters that he hated Washington and everything in it, took his revenge by vetoing all seventy bills in the consent calendar, including the Big Thicket Addition Act. Dannemire left Washington, presumably never to haunt the area inside the Beltway again. The process started over.\(^95\)

If onlookers had been puzzled over Congressman Wilson’s abrupt about-face on the issue of Big Sandy-Village Creek, none could doubt his persistence in pursuing passage of the Addition Bill in Congress. Returning to Washington with greater seniority after the November 1992 elections, on January 5, 1993, he introduced HR 433, which included the Corridor, Canyonlands and, once again, the Blue Elbow Swamp. On January 21, Phil Gramm and newly appointed Senator Bob Krueger (D-Texas) introduced S 80, which contained the Corridor and Canyonlands, but not Blue Elbow. S 80 was released by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on March 3, 1992,\(^96\) and passed the Senate on March 17.\(^97\)

Hearings were then held in the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands on May 11 with reference to Wilson’s HR 433 and the Gramm-Krueger bill S 80. Since small weekend properties on the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor had been excluded from all legislation, the only opposition was now from the National Park Service. Prophetically, Senator Bennett Johnston (D-La) objected to the bill’s restrictive language, which required acquisition within two years.\(^98\) Wilson’s HR 433, minus Blue Elbow and identical now to Gramm’s S 80, passed the House and was signed into law by President William Clinton on July 1, 1993.\(^99\)

The president’s signature may have seemed to end a remarkably long process. But it started another series of processes in motion. While it might seem a simple thing to trade land between the Forest Service and the National Park Service with the lumber companies standing as intermediaries, in practice the procedure was a complex affair. The Park Service was required to publish boundaries in the Federal Register, secure title evidence,
and make contracts with timber appraisers. Timber cruises and fair market appraisals had to be accomplished for both timber company and national forest lands. Funds then had to be secured for surveying, title searches, and appraisals.100 In 1995, $1.5 million were appropriated by Congress for these intermediaries.101

All this took time—too much time. The two-year limit against which Senator Bennett Johnston had protested was beginning to run out.102 Congressman Wilson worked to get the extension by bringing together representatives of the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the forest products industries and the relevant House and Senate committees.103 On December 5, 1995, the House passed Wilson’s HR 826, extending the deadline of the land swap to July 1998.104 Only a few months later (on April 25, 1996) the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held hearings on HR 826.105 On May 1, the Senate passed an Omnibus Parks Bill containing the Big Thicket Addition Act Extension.106 All that remained was a House-Senate conference committee to iron out any differences between House and Senate versions of several pieces of legislation included in the Omnibus Bill. Struggles between congressmen and senators over these details lasted throughout the summer, holding the Omnibus Parks Bill hostage.107

Then, in October 1996, only minutes before the 104th Congress was gavelled into history, the Omnibus Parks Bill was finally approved. This, wrote Dallas Morning News reporter Nita Thurman, must surely mean that the stream corridor had been added to the Big Thicket National Preserve at last.108 But those who have read so far—and they are to be congratulated on their stamina—must suspect that something would still emerge to stand in the way.

In the fall of 1996, Congressman Charles Wilson, after decades of service in the Texas and then the U.S. legislatures, declined to run for office. His successor, Jim Turner, also a Democrat, bravely took over where Wilson had left off, urging compromise, bringing together meetings of interested parties, even getting a thirty-day extension of the already lengthened deadline for the proposed land swap.109 The new congressman’s efforts were of no avail. Presented, in June 1997, with the requisite maps, “fair market value”
and dollar amounts clearly presented, all parties walked away from the table without so much as a discussion. The Addition Act had been scuttled.\textsuperscript{110}

Post mortem analyses of what went wrong were as numerous as speculations on tactics after a high school football game. Contract appraisers had short cut procedures while proposing questionable discounts. The Park Service was complacent when it should have been aggressive. The congressman had not done enough. Conservationists had assumed good faith on all hands when they should have been applying unremitting pressure. In the end, if there was a consensus, it leaned towards blaming the intransigence of the Forest Service, which had dragged its feet and stonewalled from beginning to end.

Whatever the causes of the exchange disaster, the results opened new possibilities—possibilities which, however, took time to be worked out. Congressman Turner pledged to continue working on the Addition Act, and to explore new avenues of approach.\textsuperscript{111} The decision on a course of action was late in coming. Legislation to purchase the Corridor and Canyonlands “in fee simple” was explored in late 1998, but rejected.\textsuperscript{112} On December 16, 1999, Turner convened a meeting in his Washington offices with representatives of the National Park Service, the Big Thicket Preserve, and The Nature Conservancy.\textsuperscript{113} The subject of this meeting was never divulged. A subsequent visit by Turner with the Forest Service also failed to produce any visible results.\textsuperscript{114} Months turned into a year, hopes dimmed, and even the remarkable patience of Big Thicket conservationists, long inured to the necessity of waiting, grew threadbare. Then suddenly, without fanfare, a solution was reached.

Sad experience had proved that it was not possible to exchange lands between timber companies and the Forest Service, and between the Forest Service and the National Park Service. Oddly enough, however, little more had been specified in the Addition Act beyond the word “exchange.” Lots of things could be exchanged for lots of things, and still be within the provisions of the act. Was this really true? The U.S. Solicitor General’s office responded affirmatively to queries by the National Park Service. Since the Corridor and Canyonlands had been “duly surveyed, monumented, and marked,” a new exchange procedure was legal and could be undertaken. The exchangers were now to be two private con-
servation organizations, the Conservation Fund and The Nature Conservancy. The exchangees were to be Temple-Inland, Louisiana-Pacific, and International Paper, which had recently absorbed Champion International.115

Until all agreements had been finalized and all contracts signed, nothing could be said publicly about the arrangement. Meanwhile the government funding necessary to support the exchange was successfully sought with the help of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-Tex), Congressman Turner, and the Bush administration. Three million dollars are budgeted for land purchase in fiscal year 2003, while the administration budget for FY 2004 includes five million dollars for land purchase.116 As these words are being written, the land exchange is gradually being worked out. Those interested in the Preserve and its fortunes continue to wait for the results. Purchase of Preserve lands took 18 years. Building its trail system took 17 years. Getting a Visitor Center took 27 years. No one will be surprised if protecting Big Sandy-Village Creek were to take a few months or years more: say 29 or 30 years from beginning to end. To see “progress” in this arena seems to be largely a matter of living long enough.

What has been achieved, however, outdistances what could be expected from the efforts of a relatively small cadre of environmentalists, some sympathetic political leaders, and some stubborn local individuals. In retrospect, what has been accomplished seems unlikely, highly improbable. The Preserve exists, enlarged by small increments and to all appearances soon to be enlarged by the Canyonlands Unit and a 60-mile creek corridor. Nearby state parks and private donations, a new Visitor Center and a scientific research center attest to the extent to which the Big Thicket has become accepted not only as a monument of Texas folklore and folk history but as a region rich in educational, recreational, and scientific values. Conservationists would add, if asked, that they are proud to have been able to do so without seriously injuring the forest products industry, fundamental to the region’s economy. Why not, then, celebrate?

There will, of course, be a celebration when it is finally assured that the Big Sandy-Village Creek Corridor and the Canyonlands are once and for all made part of the Preserve. There will be much music and speechmaking, and barbecue. But a shadow will preside over the festivities. For just as the
struggle to save a lasting remnant of the Thicket for the future seemed to have peaked, a new challenge has emerged. Some might call it a disaster. For decades, in their arguments with conservationists, the Texas Forest Products Industry has insisted that at all costs it must save its “land base.” How could it grow timber without land? Then, without warning, two of the state’s three large timber companies, Louisiana-Pacific and International Paper, did a sudden about-face. That is, they stated their intention of selling vast stretches of forest in East Texas: 1,500,000 acres, to be precise. The terminology describing this immense ecological garage sale has a certain dignity. It is called “divesting.” In January 2001, International Paper announced that it was divesting itself of 800,000 acres of its Texas holdings, primarily in southeast Texas. It would continue to own the forest lands in the Lone Star State that continued to fit its long-term strategies.\(^\text{117}\) In May 2002, Louisiana Pacific announced the divestiture of 700,000 acres.\(^\text{118}\) Suddenly, vast stretches of timberland were on the market with no one knowing who the buyers might be, or what they might do with the land.

This immense shift in land ownership could have two destructive effects. It would at least in part (perhaps a large part) destroy a set of nature preserves set up in Texas’ timber country by the forest products industry since the early 1990s. And it would strip away from the Preserve the protection that timberlands had afforded the Preserve, and which were part of the rationale for the Preserve’s spread-out configuration. Both of these factors need explaining.

The corporate nature preserves have not been mentioned so far in this essay. Had things turned out otherwise, they could have been listed as jewels in the Big Thicket Natural Area, alongside the new state parks and the preserves of private organizations. As things actually have turned out, it is not clear how many of them will survive. Carefully chosen originally for their historical, scenic, and biological values, Louisiana-Pacific’s “Living Legacy Lands” in the Big Thicket Area include: Steepbank Creek Palmetto Flats (269 acres), Mill Creek Waterfall (3 acres), Myrtle Prairie (210 acres), Burkeville Blackland (20 acres), Cow Creek Sandyland and Bogs (30 acres), Pocket Pine Savannah (100 acres), Sabine Swamp (1531 acres), Clearfork Baygall (50 acres), Dogwood Trail (88 acres), Rush Creek Ravines (300 acres), Neches Bluffs (100 acres), Woodpecker Hill (1304 acres),
and San Augustine Ridge (94 acres). The sum total of these diverse and biologically rich lands is 4099 acres.119

The Champion International’s “Special Places in the Woods” include Kickapoo Creek Corridor (320 acres), Blue Heron Rookery (95 acres), Battiste Creek Corridor (300 acres), Longleaf Pine Trail (317 acres), Old Bering Sawmill (10 acres), The Beaver Pond (40 acres), Carter Sand and Water Stop (14 acres), Vincent Creek Corridor (79 acres), and Prehistoric Oyster Reefs (315 acres).120 The total acreage of the Champion International sites is 1490 acres. Sanctuary acreage of the sites of both timber companies comes to 5589 acres.

The value of these areas is very great. The Vincent Creek Corridor contains a fully developed beech-magnolia association and in its local context is credited with being a “canyon.” The Blue Heron Rookery is a large permanent nesting place for not only herons but also a wide variety of water birds. Utterly unlike the Vincent Creek Corridor, the Battiste Creek Corridor is a meandering cypress swamp-stream. Its location provides it with plant and bird species from the forests to its north and from the coastal prairies immediately to its south. The Sabine Swamp is an important piece in an ecological jigsaw puzzle, connecting the newly created Houseman (Blue Elbow) State Park and Louisiana’s Sabine Island Wildlife Management Area. Together these three areas would comprise a vast bottomland wilderness tangle, as valuable for botanists and zoologists as for hikers, hunters, and canoers.

Descriptions of these once-protected areas could go on and on. The question, however, is whether the areas themselves will go on and on. In “divesting” themselves of their holdings, Louisiana-Pacific and Champion International made no effort to ensure protection of the small unique places they have so recently—and with great fanfare—set aside. Long telephone conversations with executives of these corporations have left the author the barren promise that whoever bought the land surrounding them “would certainly be told” about the sanctuaries and their status. It is anyone’s guess to where this might lead.

It should be added, to keep the record straight, that Temple-Inland, besides donating the Larsen Sanctuary and its creek frontage to The Nature Conservancy, continues to set aside and to protect areas valuable for their biological, archeological, and historical significance. Among these
are sites with names like Beef Creek Falls, Eleven-Log Pine, Hamilton Swamp, Money Hole, Fuller’s Earth Pit (a surface mine now filled with water), Silky Camellia Colony, and Wild Azalea Canyon. Similar areas are protected by Temple-Inland in Georgia.121

The loss of these nature preserves (in whole, or, hopefully, in part) can be described as a tragedy. If it is a tragedy, it is a tragedy of relatively small, relatively isolated areas. The sale of vast areas surrounding the Big Thicket Preserve is a loss of immense proportions. In a recent *Houston Chronicle* article, Maxine Johnston explained:

> It’s the way the preserve was laid out in the first place. Rather than one big lump like the Smoky Mountain National Park or Big Bend, the Big Thicket Preserve snakes and winds over seven counties. It has nine units, most of them joined by long twisting corridors. It was designed to save as many diverse plant associations as possible, but it gives the Preserve a lot of borders. The Preserve has almost twice as many miles of border as Yellowstone Park . . . even though Yellowstone is twenty-three times larger than the Big Thicket.122

In the past this did not seem to be a problem. Whatever else they did, timber companies were in the business of growing trees. Having timber companies next door growing pine trees like rows of corn was one thing, Johnston stated. Having those pine plantations turn into subdivisions or five-acre tracts full of mobile homes, barking dogs, all-terrain vehicles and Chinese tallow trees would be much worse.123

Environmentalists concede that such situations may not appear in the short run. They add, however, that in the long run, after large acreages are purchased, these will be broken up into smaller tracts, which will then be sold at a profit by raising the price per acre. These in turn could be broken up into smaller tracts, which could be sold at a profit by raising their cost per acre. These, in turn, could be fragmented into still smaller sections, and, again, sold at higher prices per acre, thus producing a profit. And so on. Fragmentation of habitat would follow closely on the heels of fragmentation of land ownership. Subdivisions, trailer parks, strip malls, and convenience stores would replace forest. In an area in which so much has
been done to preserve wilderness and the wilderness experience, the thrust towards unchecked urban and suburban sprawl comes, environmentalists state, as a needless and destructive process. For these reasons and because of the Big Thicket’s “biologically sensitive” nature, the National Parks and Conservation Association has recently named the Big Thicket National Preserve one of the nation’s ten most endangered parks.124

Conservationists feel that, having confronted a series of dilemmas that they have largely managed to resolve, they now are confronted with having to “save” the Big Thicket all over again. On their side in any such project is the fact that the land they wish to add to the Preserve, thus “buffering” it, is land put on the market by willing sellers. The problem is not that of “condemning” lands that a seller wishes to keep. It is that of finding money to fund the purchase. Congressman Jim Turner has requested that the National Park Service identify Louisiana-Pacific and International Paper land that could strengthen and protect the Preserve. The Park Service has complied, listing those parcels that would protect the Preserve from rampant development.125 These lands involve around nine percent of the acreage currently on the market.126 The total cost would be in the neighborhood of $116,000,000: 145,000 acres at an average of $800 per acre.127

Meanwhile the two large lumber companies’ lands are already being sold. In early 2003 Louisiana-Pacific sold 27,000 acres in San Augustine County near Cleveland.128 Subsequently, Louisiana-Pacific reported the sale of 43,500 acres in the “Saratoga Block” in southeast Texas. Molpus Woodlands Group has purchased two blocks of land from Louisiana-Pacific, one (36,260 acres) near Oakhurst, the other a massive 145,000 acres near Corrigan.129 More recently, Molpus has announced the acquisition of 450,000 acres: price tag $285,000,000. These lands are in Hardin, Jasper, Liberty, Newton, Orange, Polk, and Tyler Counties.130 It will come as a relief to many that, according to corporate spokesmen, these areas are to be managed “for long term timber production,” not real estate speculation.

5. Postscript to a Postscript

The present essay attempts to describe the history of the Big Thicket National Preserve, and of the Big Thicket region generally, from 1974 up to
the present time (fall 2003). It must be confessed that the chronicle, though
multi-sided and often weighted with particular facts, might have been much
longer. This is so because other factors and other facts might have been
discussed. Here are a few examples, in no particular order: 1. Lamar Univer-
sity has recently created a Center for the Study of the Big Thicket. It will
operate in tandem with the Big Thicket Archives already in place in that
university’s Grey Library. Efforts have been made to raise the water
level of Steinhagen Reservoir, on the Neches River, in the process drowning
out both a rich wildlife management area and a state park (Martin Dies
State Park). The goal of this is to store water to sell to Houston. 3. The Big
Thicket Association has recently created a Big Thicket National Heritage
Trust. On the basis of this trust it has been able to purchase 45 acres at the
confluence of Peach Creek and Village Creek. This purchase will be deeded
to the Big Thicket National Preserve. 4. A National Science Foundation
grant has been awarded to the University of North Texas to study the im-
 pact of human values on the choices that will be made in the development
of the region. This grant, which it is expected will be renewed, will study the
Big Thicket in terms of the impact of human values on nature. 5. A grant
from the T. L. L. Temple Foundation has funded the University of North
Texas Press Temple Big Thicket Series, of which the present book is the
fourth volume. 6. The Houston Wilderness, a recently founded private
group, has projected a ring of parks, preserves, refuges, hiking and canoeing
trails encircling Houston. This far-sighted project impinges on the Big Thicket
region at two points: the western part of the Big Thicket near Sam Houston
National Forest and in the San Jacinto River Basin, and the west-central
part of the Big Thicket along the Trinity River, including Davis Hill State
Park and the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge. Big Thicket conserva-
tionists have joined with the Houston Wilderness to promote this venture.
Other developments, present and past, might have been added to these. But
the present essay is long enough. To lengthen it to cover all factors that
might be thought relevant would be to write not a postscript but a second
book, nearly as long as the one to which it is appended.

Prof. Pete A.Y. Gunter
University of North Texas
Denton, Texas 76203