

Cypress Creek: Past, Present, Future

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The summer of 2009 was an extraordinary time: temperatures brutally hot, day after day above 100 degrees..., and DRY. South-central Texas appeared on the country's "Drought Monitor" maps for most of the year as a prominent red and brown splotch, indicating "extreme" or "exceptional" drought, the most severe of five stages. This hot summer followed twenty dry months, Oct. '07 through May. '09.

We compare this drought with 1925, an earlier time of heat and dryness, with severe crop failures in the Blanco-Cypress Valley. Residents then grew much of their food, which raised the issue of survival. Folks pitched in to help each other, as there was no Brookshire Brothers to provide in great abundance.

Also, the LCRA is comparing this drought with the 7-year "drought of record," which began in 1950 and lasted through '56. It was interrupted in '52 and '53 by a flood or two, only to return to the marathon dryness of '54, '55, and '56 – a time when many ranches failed and much wildlife perished. Over half the deer starved on the ranch where our family hunted in Mason County. Comal Springs in New Braunfels ceased to flow for about four months in 1956.

Note: Jacob's Well and Cypress Creek continued to flow during that period, providing much of the water in the Blanco River below their confluence in Wimberley. This provides a benchmark for judging the effects of our present pumping.

We somehow survive heat and drought, as did our forebears, but what is different now is the impact of our huge numbers and consumption on available water supply, to mention only one resource. The 1950s scattering of wells, many pumped by windmills, have been replaced by deeper wells with powerful electric pumps. There are over 6,000 such water wells in Western Hays County, a vastly different situation.

For a first-hand look, and to better understand this impact, I made a survey of Cypress Creek on Aug 24 (this is being written in Sept.). Blue Hole was closed to public access. There was no flow in the Creek or from Jacob's Well. From midsummer on, the Creek had morphed into a series of stagnant pools, many covered with algae and scum, alternating with long muddy or dry stretches.

Most pools contained surviving fish, turtles, frogs, and countless smaller critters that hunker down to wait for wetter times. Nature is patient that way. Many trees, even a few along stream banks, have shed leaves early. For some this is an act of conservation and survival; others will die.

The consequences of drought and pumping have brought us to a critical time, as we take stock and plan for our future here. It has been painful to look at Cypress Creek and allow this reality to sink in. Something fundamentally important is changing. It is depressing. Some would avoid the issue. Call it the price of progress.

But we have a responsibility to this place. Much is at stake. The importance of this extraordinary creek and the great spring that normally supplies it cannot be swept aside. Jacob's Well and Cypress Creek are

treasures that long ago placed this area on the short list of special places in Texas. Wimberley is where it is because of Cypress Creek.

The early mills which the Creek powered were built to grind corn, produce flour, saw wood, gin cotton and even squeeze the juice from cane to make molasses. Flowing water is a source of renewable energy. Here it was abundant, and the Village developed around this critical resource. The mill became the center of the community.

A place that started out as “Glendale,” over time, adopted a series of names: Winter’s Mill, Cude’s Mill, and Wimberley’s Mill – reflecting the importance of the mill and its owner. Finally, the Post Office settled on the shorter name **Wimberley** in the 1880s.

In the 20th Century, the identity of the community grew even closer to Cypress Creek and the Rio Blanco, as an agricultural economy slowly gave way to arts, crafts, summer places, and tourism..., based on scenic views, rustic places, wildlife, the quiet and spaciousness that mark country life, and water-based recreation. These, plus the attraction of the Valley and community as a place for retirement, shaped the culture and economy of the area as we know it.

Cypress Creek is sometimes referred to as the Valley’s “economic engine” – perhaps a bit crass, but not far off the mark. Those who came here often wished to keep Wimberley a secret, but the development of Eagle Rock, and later Woodcreek, along the Creek, and the popularity of Blue Hole as one of Texas’ prime swimming holes and a place for dealing with summer heat, especially before air conditioning, meant that such a secret was hard to keep. The cool clear waters of Cypress and Blanco swimming holes were a joy to all who lived here or visited.

We have been keenly aware of this past during the waning days of summer and the arrival of fall – times that brought a continuing heavy reality of drought, suddenly interrupted by the surprising joy of rainfall. Whether we go back into dryness after good September rains is yet to be seen. Some predict that Pacific Ocean warming, “El Nino,” will bring wetter weather this fall. But even if that is the case, these two years of extreme drought and our efforts at response have some major lessons for us. Several conclusions are becoming clear:

1. We are losing Cypress Creek. The trajectory we are on will lead to its becoming a wet-weather creek, flowing in good rain years and drying up or becoming a septic mess in dry times.
2. We cannot allow a few good rains to distract us from the reality of where we are... on the edge of a great arid region some refer to as the Great American Desert. Water planning must include wide margins to accommodate drought.
3. Drought planning now is multi-layered and confusing. We must streamline and coordinate these plans – produced by water supply companies, cities, and the groundwater district.
4. We have no water to waste. Pumping water and allowing it to evaporate from spills or distribution system leaks..., or from ponds, must be minimized.
5. We must strengthen and fund our groundwater conservation district so that it can do the job of managing our local aquifer, responsive to the people who live here and who care about this place.

6. We must listen to each other. A good information and communication program is necessary for the citizen participation and support needed in water planning and management.
7. We find more and more evidence that rainwater harvesting is the key to future water supply here in Western Hays County. It can provide adequate water of excellent quality while allowing our springs to recover – so Hill Country streams will flow.

Losing Jacob's Well and Cypress Creek is not an option for the Blanco-Cypress Valley. Present pumping and the prospect of growing demand on the aquifer pose a clear threat to these priceless resources; however, their loss is not inevitable. We are not helpless in facing this threat, but the needed actions will require a strong community effort.

Future articles will address ways to restore and maintain the Creek and its major source, beginning with notes on the work under way in the Cypress Creek Project.