

Kitchen Table Activists:

The story behind Government Canyon State Natural Area and the people who made it happen.

By Cynthia Leal Massey

THERE IS NOT A MONUMENT AT THE 8,600-ACRE GOVERNMENT CANYON STATE NATURAL AREA to the two individuals who deserve it most. But that is the way of the world, and Patricia “Kyle” Cunningham and Danielle Milam would no doubt refuse to pose for it anyway. “This is the monument,” says Cunningham, gesturing during a fall hike at the magnificent landscape of the rugged nature preserve in northwest Bexar County, just a few miles from Helotes. “It’s not about us. It’s about this land that we were able to save for future generations. When I am long gone, this land will still be here, and that’s what matters.”

Still it must be disconcerting to see the names of individuals who came later in the project displayed prominently at the headquarters at Government Canyon Nature State Natural Area, which opened in 2005. Visitors walk past a large limestone rock with the words “Tim and Karen Hixon Visitors Center” chiseled in the stone. A bronze plaque with the name “Fay Sinkin” is displayed prominently within the walkway of the center.

Not that the Hixons and Sinkin didn’t play roles in the establishment of Government Canyon State Natural Area. The Hixons are long-time conservationists with a foundation dedicated to protection of land and water resources. Tim Hixon,

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David Sutton, Trust for Public Land

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a San Antonio businessman, was also a member of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, the entity entrusted with the maintenance of Government Canyon State Natural Area. According to Milam, who with Cunningham, co-chaired the Government Canyon Coalition (GCC), “If Tim hadn’t been sitting on the TPW board, they might never have looked at it [the deal to purchase Government Canyon].”

As for Sinkin’s involvement: “While Fay sat on the Edward’s Underground Water District board, and that was way before the nineties, she had convinced the board to put together a pot of money for ‘land and conservation,’” says Milam.

In 1974, Sinkin formed the Aquifer Protection Association (APA) at the request of the San Antonio League of Women Voters. The APA drew public attention to the aquifer and developed support for the purchase of sensitive areas in the aquifer recharge zone. Formed after environmentalists lost their bid to stop an 80,000-home HUD “New Town” development, later called San Antonio Ranch, in the hill country north of Helotes, the APA promoted short and long range policies and planning that focused on aquifer protection as the city of San Antonio rapidly grew northward.

Although the environmentalists failed in their suits against the developers—all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court—the HUD-inspired housing community never materialized due to the savings and loan bust in the 1980s. Only about 200 residences dot the hills of San Antonio Ranch.

In 1988, Sinkin convened another group—this one included Milam—to “figure out how to get some undeveloped land



Government Canyon Visitors Center features an Exhibit Hall and Recharge Store that provide information and merchandise designed to promote awareness and preservation of the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone.

protected in order to preserve our aquifer,” according to an interview in a Fall 2001 Trust for Public Land newsletter.

“We were looking at undeveloped RTC (Resolution Trust Corporation) property over the aquifer recharge zone,” says Milam. “The Government Canyon property was not on the San Antonio RTC rolls, so we didn’t know about it. If it hadn’t been for people out on the ground, and Kyle, certainly, who had kept her eye on this piece of property a long, long time, we wouldn’t have known about it.”

Although more than forty groups and organizations, public and private, were ultimately involved in the acquisition and founding of Government Canyon State Natural Area, the early activists have been all but forgotten. Had it not been for them, and in particular, Cunningham and Milam, the ancient Indian camping ground and pioneer ranch land would be another victim of “progress.”

Canyon Discovery

Kyle and husband Hank moved to San Antonio Ranch from Beaumont in the late seventies. By 1981, the couple had moved to Helotes, where Hank opened a bicycle shop in the oldest building downtown, the Guger homestead, built in 1881. The Cunninghams spent many weekends hiking through the wilderness of Government Canyon. At the time, they didn’t know the history of the canyon, but they knew it was special.

A quintessentially Texas hill country habitat, the rugged terrain of towering cliffs and rocky hillsides were thick with oak, juniper and mesquite trees. Meadows of native grasses and wildflowers, and thickets of cacti dotted the landscape. Within the cliffs were caves—one of them a huge bat cave. Creek beds crisscrossed the canyon. Rain seeped through ancient limestone beds into the Edwards Aquifer, over which much of the canyon laid. Ferns along rocky beds gave testament to ancient springs. And there was an abundance of wildlife—bobcats, porcupines, rabbits, deer, birds.

Then there was the old one-and-a-half-story rock house they discovered on one of their early hikes—a nineteenth century limestone building, strategically located by a spring close to the top of the canyon. To whom did this old structure belong? For what was it used? And down the old road from the house were huge oaks festooned with long layers of gray Spanish moss. “I remember the first time I saw it,” says Kyle. “I was in awe. The Indians must’ve thought this was a mystical and holy place.”



Patricia “Kyle” Cunningham, co-chair of the Government Canyon Coalition, under oaks festooned with layers of gray Spanish moss along the Joe Johnston route through Government Canyon.

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Kyle was heartsick that eventually it would all be gone, bulldozed for the 80,000 homes planned after William Lytle Jr. sold his family's 8,400-acre ranch to speculators in 1967. All she could do was sit back, watch and hope.

Never one to be idle, Kyle learned about the history of her newly adopted hometown and surrounding areas. By the time the Government Canyon property (then called Wild Horse Canyon Ranch) came on the auction block, Kyle, who holds a degree in agricultural journalism from Texas A&M, had learned much more about the canyon and knew what she was fighting for.

History of the Canyon

The canyon area has an 11,000-year history of human occupation, according to archeologists. The earliest inhabitants were nomads who hunted large herd animals following along dirt roads and creeks snaking through the canyon. Later, Jumanos, Comanches and Apaches followed migrating herds of buffalo through similar routes. Spanish soldiers also traversed through the canyon in search of renegades or other bounty. In the early 1850s, a U.S. government survey crew camped in the canyon for four months to scout possible routes for roads to supply frontier forts from military headquarters in San Antonio. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Johnston led the expedition, hence the name of the main route through today's natural area. Freighters used the route to deliver lumber, coal, hay and fuel to outposts.

By the beginning of the civil war, few permanent residents lived in or around Government Canyon. By 1863, however, that would change when Jacob and Caroline Hoffmann began to purchase land in Government Canyon. Natives of Germany, the Hoffmanns purchased parcel after parcel, using the land for livestock and crop raising, until they had accumulated more than 7,500 acres by 1890. They sold several large parcels to Christian and Emilie Zizelmann, San Antonio merchants who built the story-and-a-half stone house in the canyon, which was likely used as a way station for freighters.

After Christian's death in 1891, his wife sold the land back to the Hoffmann family, who had by then purchased another 5,119 acres near, but outside, today's natural area. After Jacob's 1903 death, the land was subdivided among their children. Caroline and her son



German immigrants Caroline and Jacob Hoffmann began purchasing large parcels of land in west Bexar County in 1863, accumulating more than 12,000 acres. In 1927, Hoffmann heirs sold 7,784 acres encompassing the heart of Government Canyon to William J. Lytle. Photo courtesy of Lloyd Benke.

Jacob Jr. held on to 7,784 acres. When Caroline died in 1927, her heirs sold the land to W. J. Lytle, who used it as a cattle ranch until his death in 1957. Ten years later, his son, William J. Lytle Jr., sold the land to investors.

Scharf's Kitchen Table

Cunningham started the Helotes Creek Association (HCA) with Irene Scharf in the late 1980s to "protect, preserve and enhance the area, with special attention given to Scenic Loop Road and the development of new state highways being considered."

Scharf, a librarian by profession, was no stranger to grassroots activism. In 1985, she became involved in the Save Scenic Loop campaign when residents of Grey Forest discovered plans for a five-lane divided highway on Scenic Loop Road, an historic Indian trail and stagecoach route. The group was successful in getting the road off San Antonio's major thoroughfare plan. She was also involved in the Bexar County Trinity Aquifer Conservation Coalition, formed to protect the area water supply from mega-users such as golf courses and quarries.

The early meetings of the grassroots activists took place around Scharf's kitchen table in an old farmhouse off

A view from an intersection of the dry riverbed of Government Canyon Creek and Joe Johnston route looking at the cliffs of the Canyon Overlook.



Scenic Loop Road. Mary Fenstermaker (of the Altgelt-Maverick-Fromme Ranch in northwest Bexar), in a February 2006 Texas Legacy Project interview, spoke about early meetings with Scharf and Cunningham. “In the beginning, a group of just citizens, Kyle Cunningham from Helotes and Irene Scharf from Grey Forest, and Bebe [Fenstermaker’s sister] and me, and others... were brought together by Kyle... She wanted to save this piece of property she was looking at as a park. And it was going to be a headache to acquire.... Kyle was just vigilant on it, and she kept us all with our noses to the grindstone to acquire it.”

In the spring of 1991, the HCA learned about a 900-acre foreclosed parcel in San Antonio Ranch. The Sierra Club had been attempting to drum up support to save the property as a park and wildlife conservancy to lukewarm support. Club members brought the land to HCA’s attention. Cunningham jumped at the chance to save the land and began making phone calls to the original players against the “New Town” development to see if anyone was interested in saving the property as a park.

“That’s how I met Danielle,” says Cunningham.

“Kyle put together a tour of the property and that’s when our two groups joined together,” says Milam, who was water chair for the League of Women Voters and a member of the Edwards Aquifer Protection Trust (EAPT). “At the time, we [EAPT] continued to lobby the EUWD for more than just the Government Canyon land, but years went by and they didn’t act, so it finally boiled down to our focus being the canyon.”

The Helotes Creek Association got on the agenda of the Bexar County Commissioner’s Court and presented a resolution to earmark the 900-acre foreclosed land for a public park. “During this meeting, we learned that more than 4,500 acres of Government Canyon had been taken over by the Resolution Trust Corporation,” says Cunningham. “Commissioner [Paul] Elizondo said, ‘Why don’t you ladies focus on a really large natural area, Government Canyon?’”

“By then, of course, I knew about Government Canyon, and we [the Helotes Creek Association] focused our attention on that,” says Cunningham. However, she didn’t give up on the original 900 acres the group had been interested in initially. She wanted to make sure they didn’t go to public auction, and she made more phone calls.

The day before the auction, she contacted an environmental lawyer in Austin who told her that the land had been removed from the selling block. Just to make sure, Cunningham went to the auction. That day the only parcel sold was the swimming pool at San Antonio Ranch, purchased by the homeowners’ association. “That was a good thing,” says Cunningham.

Dogged Determination

In the summer of 1991, Cunningham quit her job at the Health Science Center to devote her attention to putting together a coalition that would be able to purchase Government Canyon as a public nature preserve. She brought Milam on board as co-chair. “We needed someone with connections and political savvy. Danielle was the logical person.”

Christian and Emilie Zizelmann, San Antonio merchants, purchased land from the Hoffmanns and built this story-and-a-half stone house along the Joe Johnston route in the early 1880s, likely as a way station for freighters.

Cunningham hit pay dirt when she contacted David Sutton of the Santa Fe, New Mexico branch of the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit land conservation organization. Someone from the Sierra Club had called Sutton several times about the canyon, but the group failed to articulate the project in a way that made it sound feasible. Kyle was another story. She convinced Sutton to come to Texas to meet with the Helotes Creek Association. “All of a sudden, it felt like there was something there. Looking at the size of the property and Kyle’s ability to describe why it was significant. It was certainly worth a trip,” says Sutton.

“There were about a dozen people at this meeting. I asked each of them if they would both support and apply effort to try to make it happen. They all said yes. That was the watershed moment when I thought we could give it a shot.” After seeing the canyon, Sutton was even more convinced that this was a worthwhile project.

“It was also clear before long that there were two people absolutely instrumental in making things happen locally, and that was Kyle and Danielle,” says Sutton.

The two women worked relentlessly to drum up support for the project. They spent a lot of time attending meetings, on the phone and writing letters—this was before the Internet and email—and organized a coalition of churches, neighborhood associations, conservation organizations, birders, architects, scientists, mountain bikers, and even some ranchers and developers into the Government Canyon Coalition.

The unique qualities of the landscape: that it was the home to two endangered species, the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo; its archeological and historical significance; and of most importance, its location over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, were vital selling points.

Sutton became the TPL project manager for the canyon. Cunningham returned to the workforce in November 1992, continuing to focus her attention in the evenings and weekends on the Government Canyon project, while Milam, a freelance urban planner raising four small children, picked up the day time slack, attending meetings that both would have normally attended.

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They strategized over the phone at night with Sutton, often participating in three-way conference calls. "I think my children grew up thinking that a phone was permanently attached to my ear, because most of the business was conducted by phone." Milam laughs.

"It was an almost three-year process that went from fairly lukewarm interest to strong votes of support by all four of the agencies, after a ton of legwork, but we finally got there," says Sutton, who helped the coalition arrange to get \$1 million from the Edwards Underground Water District, \$500,000 from the San Antonio Water System and \$500,000 from Texas Parks and Wildlife for the canyon.

In March 1993, the Trust for Public Land purchased the land from the Resolution Trust Corporation for \$2 million. Texas Parks and Wildlife took over the title and assumed management of the park. The partners acquired more adjacent acreage, almost doubling the preserve's size to 8,622 acres, with the last parcel purchased in 2004.

The Government Canyon Coalition morphed into the Government Canyon Natural History Association, with Cunningham as the founding president. The association's mission was to plan for the park and its management.

In October 2005, Government Canyon State Natural Area opened its gates to the public with 41 miles of hiking and biking trails, 20 picnic sites and a covered group pavilion. Kyle's husband Hank started and still participates in a mountain bike patrol that maintains the existing ranch roads, trails and boundaries, and searches for lost hikers.

Accolades

Cunningham and Milam received the San Antonio Conservation Society's Texas Preservation Hero award in 1994. Cunningham's citation saluted her "for her vision of Government Canyon as a ruggedly beautiful natural area, a safeguarded wildlife habitat, a protected aquifer recharge area, a preserved site of archeological and historical remains and a public park. Her intractable tenacity and teamwork helped her turn vision into reality."

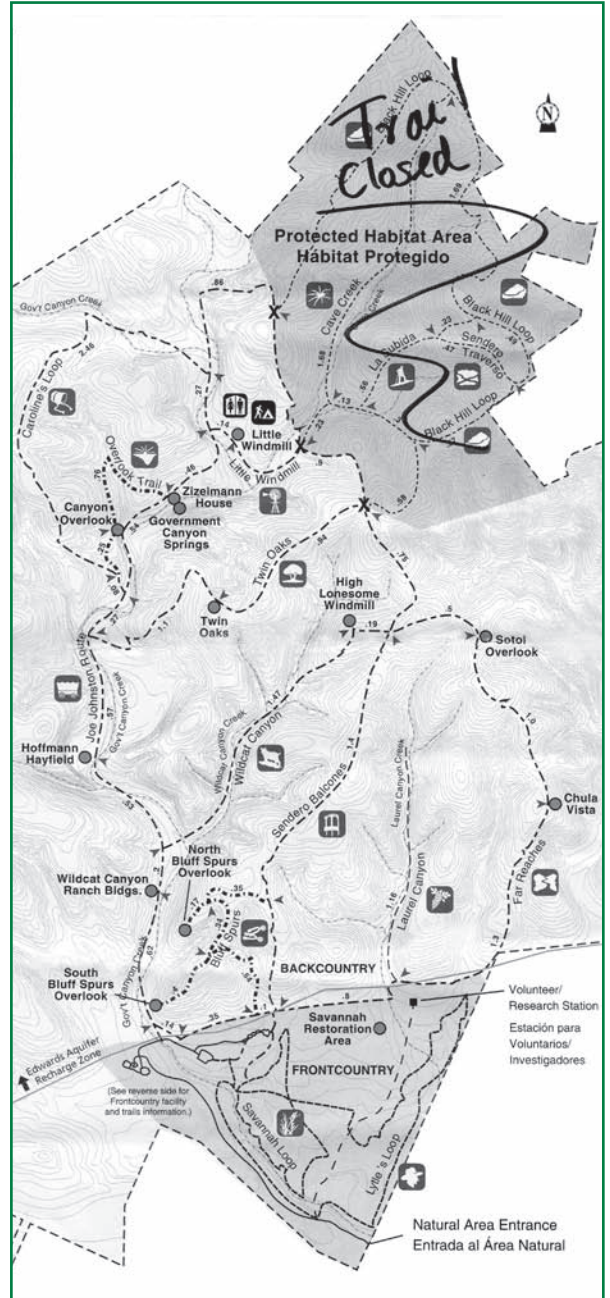
Cunningham, health program manager for the Public Center for Environmental Health, a division of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District, believes that "the real story of Government Canyon has to do with what a very small group of folks can get accomplished."

David Sutton, who now works in San Francisco for the Trust for Public Land, California/Nevada region, says, "I have no doubt whatsoever that we would not have been successful were it not for Kyle; we would not have been successful were it not for Danielle. I think the three of us made a heck of a team."

Milam, senior vice president of program and development for the Urban Libraries Council in Chicago, where she moved six years ago, agrees. "Dave had the technical expertise, both in law and in doing real estate deals; Kyle was an incredible researcher and never took no for an answer. My part of the deal was to shape out the words and get out in public."

Ultimately, it was Cunningham's vision that was a guiding force for all of them. According to Sutton, "Government Canyon would never have happened without Kyle's leadership, determination and tenacity. It was quite a heroic effort." SA

Cynthia Leal Massey's book Helotes, Where the Texas Hill Country Begins, which includes several chapters on the Government Canyon property, will be published in the spring.



Government Canyon State Natural Area

12861 Galm Road, San Antonio, TX 78254
(210) 688-9055. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/part/govcan>
Deirdre Hisler, Park Superintendent, Texas Parks & Wildlife

Located in Bexar County, 3.5 miles northwest of Loop 1604 on Culebra Road, then 1.6 miles north on Galm Road, the park is open for day use only, Friday through Monday from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Back country closes at 4:00 p.m.; front country closes at 5:00 p.m. as do the Exhibit Hall and Recharge Store. Several park rangers and park interpreters (guides), as well as many volunteers, run and maintain the vast preserve.

