

## Fire History of the Westbank

1947 Osceola Heard Davenport, a wealthy Rio Grande Valley widow of an oilman, came to Austin to buy land to start a ranch. The Walsh brothers, owners of the Thomas Chambers Survey (1280 acres) asked Emmett Shelton, Sr. to show Mrs. Davenport the property. Mrs. Davenport always dressed the part and on this occasion was outfitted as a cowgirl with boots, fringed buckskin and a cowboy hat.

The Chambers survey is a long, narrow rectangle, fronting on Lake Austin. They traveled by pickup truck out Bee Cave Road to the Roy Ranch, then cross-country along an old trail to the highest hilltop to view the land. Mrs. Davenport was pleased and when told the price was \$40,000 declared she would take it and paid cash. With a handshake to seal the deal, she then pulled a flask of whiskey from her hip pocket, took a swig and passed it among the men. Returning to town, Mrs. Davenport complained that the purchase price of the ranch would take a whole month's income.

Emmett Shelton told her that she couldn't put more than a single head to a hundred acres because the land was so thick with trees and shrubs. The new ranch owner set about having the property cleared. Huge brush piles were stacked across the land. She employed workers to cut trees and stack them for burning. Many of these stacks of drying timber and brush when burned set sparks flying onto the property of others like Emmett Shelton who had moved into the West Lake Hills area.

Mrs. Davenport built a small stone ranch house, but despite her efforts the only area where cattle could graze were the same 200 acres at the far north end of the peninsula used by the Walsh brothers. She soon grew tired of her venture and never put any cattle on any other areas of the land.

When Emmett Shelton returned from World War II, he wrote Mrs. Davenport a letter warning her of serious consequences if she were to keep burning brush and causing fires. She quit burning the brush piles that were still there in 1961 and caused considerable impact on the vegetation, extending into the part of the ranch now included in the Wild Basin preserve. [Information compiled by Kathryn Respass with anecdotal information from Emmett Shelton, Sr. April 14, 1961]

About 9 a.m. on Friday, April 14, 1961, a motorist traveling along St. Stephens School Road on the western boundary of the Roy Ranch carelessly tossed a lighted cigarette out the window and ignited a grass fire. A strong wind out of the west quickly spread the flames east across the Roy Ranch and onto Davenport Ranch. There the fire leaped from one old brush pile to another and fed on dried vegetation in canyons and ravines leading southward. There were no roads into the area and at least a dozen contractors in town sent bulldozers to help build a fire lane and to try to control the inferno.

More than two hundred students from The University of Texas and St. Edward's University volunteered to fight the fire. An intensive two-day community effort stopped the fire short of Bee Creek. All of Wild Basin north of a line parallel to Bee Creek and just north of the creek, burned in the fire. However, many big trees, including cedar trees, did not burn [newspaper account, April 18, 1961]. Shelton regards the woods along Bee Creek as having been untouched by any disturbance, cutting or fire.

The halting of the fire's progress at the line north of Bee Creek was by means of a fire lane, cut by bulldozers. The '61 fire came only four years after the end of the worst drought in weather department records for the area. When the fire began just east of St. Stephen's School Road, Emmett Shelton, Jr. thought they could put it out by stamping or beating it, but the grass fire quickly ignited the brush and it was too late for quick action.

Some main factors affecting the fire which spread to about 4000 acres were: (1) the extremely dry conditions preceding the fire (Jan. to March had been drier than the same period at any time during the drought of the 50s); (2) the wind shift to the west, and then the strong cold front that brought winds, NNW and N up to 25 knots; (3) the difficulty of getting into the canyons with equipment; and (4) the piles of brush on the Davenport Ranch.

The fire began about 9 a.m. on Friday, April 14 and was still burning on Sunday evening. Some spots flared up again on Monday, April 17. Emmett Shelton, Sr. reported that the fire tended to follow the canyons, which run roughly east-west and the winds were mostly NW and NNW. He felt the dry leaf litter and Davenport brush piles enabled the fire to spread quickly and remarked that "the large living cedar trees were slow to catch fire, though, when they do, they explode like anti-aircraft fire".

After the fire, April and the first weeks of May continued to be without rain. However, good rains in May and June appeared to help the trees and shrubs make good growth. The rainfall for '61 and '62 was average; '63 was another drought year; and in '64 the normal rains returned. The environment that developed after the fire, new growth of live oak, Texas oak, evergreen sumac and silk tassel interspersed on open grassland, provides excellent habitat for many birds and animals.