

Disaster Report: Houston And Lubbock Are Doomed

Texas Monthly

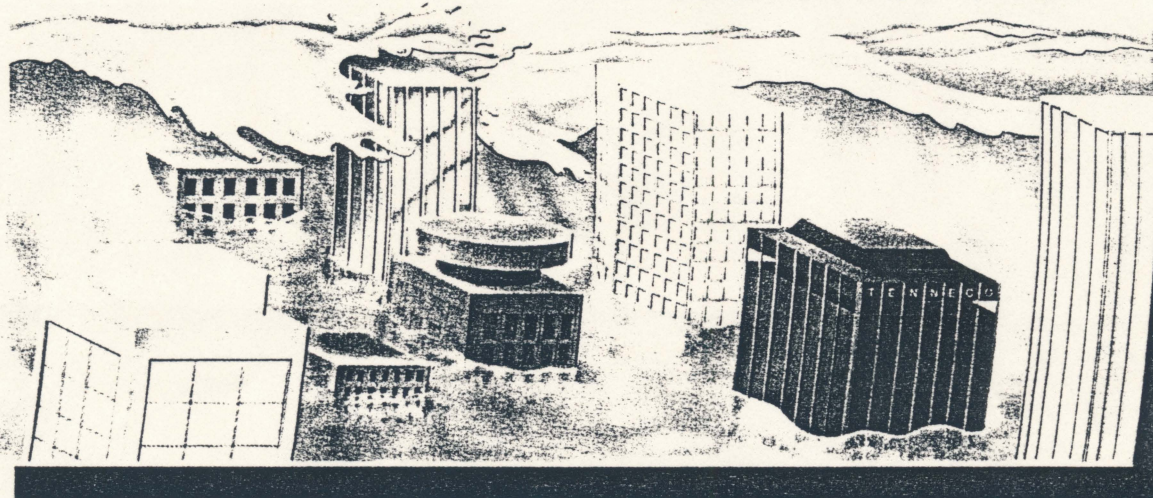
That Presidential Touch

by BENJAMIN
CARROLL



VISIT HOUSTON

CITY BENEATH THE WAVES



by William Broyles

Disaster, Part II. Houston is sinking into the sea.

At high tide the waves lap through the upstairs bedrooms of the comfortable colonial home Dr. Jesse Kirkpatrick built on the shores of Crystal Bay before World War II. Since 1943, the land it rests on has subsided more than seven feet (three feet in the past ten years), so that today the house sits 50 feet out in the bay like some shipwrecked houseboat deserted by its crew. The Kirkpatrick home is one of 448 homes in Brownwood, a pleasant, wooded, middle-to-upper-middle-class subdivision of Baytown, twenty miles east of downtown Houston. Some of the nicest homes, those on a point where Crystal Bay meets Burnet Bay, have disappeared entirely. Around many of the remaining homes the owners have built walls of sandbags in what can only be an ultimately futile effort to keep out the waves now within a few feet of their doors.

It was inconceivable to the Kirkpatricks and to their neighbors that any disaster could be worse than the destructive tides and waves of Hurricane Carla which damaged so many of their homes in 1961. Across the Houston Ship Channel, however, the booming plants and industries of the world's largest petro-

chemical complex and the nation's third largest port had set in motion an inexorable geologic process which destined their quiet neighborhood for the bottom of Galveston Bay. This great agricultural, industrial, and refining economy—and its population—have been fueled by 190 billion gallons of water a year, available easily and cheaply from industrial and municipal wells. These wells have steadily drained the Evangeline and Chicot aquifers (underground water storage systems) faster than they are refilled by annual rainfall. Each year the wells must go deeper to find water. Because of the region's geology, water is a vital structural component of the clay and sand underlying the land surface; when it is removed, the land sinks.

Brownwood, since it originally lay less than ten feet above sea level, felt the effects first. People who had painstakingly rebuilt their homes after Carla discovered that the bay was eating away at their land, inch by inch, year by year. As the ground sank faster—four inches a year—they stopped worrying about chinch bugs and routine maintenance and started building bulkheads and sandbagging their patios. Some families parked a car permanently on higher

ground, kept their belongings in packing crates, and had local moving companies standing by to ensure their escape from another heavy storm or hurricane. Throughout the 1960s, as the plight of the people of Brownwood became palpably hopeless, geologists began making studies, engineers began making surveys, and politicians began making promises. Nothing substantial was done.

Today, however, the problem is much more serious than the plight of one neighborhood. The residents of Brownwood are not alone in living on the brink of certain natural disaster. Over 20,000 acres of Houston-Galveston area land has already sunk, or will soon sink, beneath the waters of Galveston Bay and its estuaries. More than \$100 million in property has been lost *so far*. In Kemah the U.S. Post Office is routinely flooded; in Texas City and Pasadena storm sewers now run in the wrong direction; at the San Jacinto Monument a University of Texas geologist was surrounded recently by leaping schools of mullet and water up to his neck as he navigated the "walkway" around the reflecting pool of our state's independence shrine. Throughout the area, more than 1000 miles of faults activated by subsidence threaten residential and in-

dustrial structures, as well as the web of pipelines crisscrossing the ship channel on their way to fuel the great critics of the North and East.

These effects of subsidence are occurring steadily and gradually; the land sinks—and the faults separate—a few more inches each year. The truly catastrophic effects of subsidence, however, will come with the violence and killer destructiveness of Gulf hurricanes. As surely as summer turns to autumn, the majority of the land in the Houston-Galveston area will in the not-too-distant future (for a day or more) be buried beneath the storm-tossed waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The prospect speaks eloquently from contour maps of the region. The line marking high ground during a hurricane (land twenty feet above sea level) is steadily moving inland, and now in places begins more than ten miles from the present shoreline of Galveston Bay. Subsidence has made huge chunks of land which have never been flooded vulnerable to hurricane tides. According to Davis Benton of the National Weather Service in Galveston, "A massive hurricane will cross Galveston Island, sooner or later." When it does, the Johnson Space Center (elev. 15-25 feet), the Texas City refinery complex (elev. 5-15 feet), many of the industries along the upper ship channel (elev. 10-35 feet), and more than 1000 square miles of land will be under water.

Predictions on just how high hurricane tides will get vary according to the source. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has developed detailed projections for the most severe hurricane which it says could reasonably be expected to occur. The Corps predicts maximum tides on Galveston Island of fifteen feet, with nineteen feet at NASA and twenty feet in the upper ship channel area from Baytown to the turning basin on Clinton Drive. Subsidence means that land which would have been five feet out of water in such a hurricane twenty years ago would be inundated today. Hurricanes, however, have a nasty habit of being unreasonable: they may head straight over land at twenty miles an hour as Camille did, or they may meander back and forth, change direction, or just sit still, as Carla did. Both those recent hurricanes caused tides of *more than twenty feet* where they went inland; if Carla had crossed directly over Galveston Island (instead of 100 miles to the southwest) the tidal levels would have exceeded the Corps of Engineers' maximum figures by *five feet*. As Chester Pawlik of the Corps of Engineers' Galveston office says, "Sure, twenty-five foot tides are possible. Thirty-foot tides are possible. Even higher is possible. It would just be rare." Whether that future hurricane which crosses Galveston brings tides of

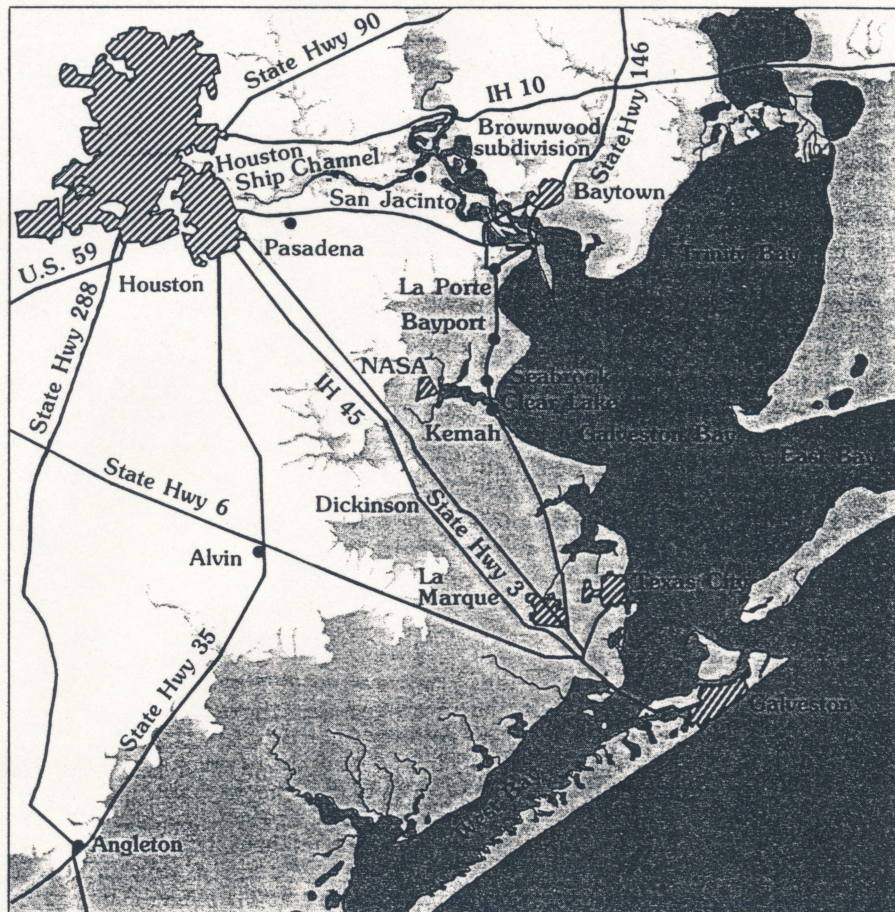
twenty or thirty feet in upper Galveston Bay, subsidence has made their net effect almost ten feet higher. The effects of a net high tide of more than thirty feet, in a region where an elevation of twenty feet is high ground, are almost impossible to calculate.

The loss of property from Carla was \$350 million; from a major hurricane striking directly at the Galveston Bay area, the cost would be in the billions of dollars. But subsidence has played another, more deadly, role. The only escape route from Galveston Island, IH 45, has now sunk so low that it will be cut off more than twelve hours *before* a major hurricane crosses Galveston; at the height of such a storm, the highway will be fifteen feet under water. Galveston is not much safer from a direct hit than it was in 1900, when hurricane-driven waves swept across the island and took 6000 lives in what is still the United States' worst natural disaster. At the height of such a hurricane today, the temporary shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico will be ten miles inland. Galveston will be fifteen miles *out to sea* and its highest point—the seawall (elev. 15.3 feet)—will be five feet under waves powered by 180 mile-an-hour winds. These waves will destroy everything in their path—property and people. Subsidence means that this future storm will be inconceivably more

terrible than Carla. The whole area is directly in the path of a disaster worse than any in its history.

A major hurricane last struck Galveston in 1915; the next is now overdue. The Houston-Galveston area for two generations has played a successful game of meteorological roulette. The Ship Channel was opened in 1914; the vast petrochemical complex along its banks began in earnest in 1941; the Johnson Space Center and its adjacent industrial and residential developments such as Bayport were opened in 1961; and U.S. Steel and the other major plants along what once was high ground in Baytown were started in the late 1960s. None of the basic infrastructure of the region's economy has ever gone through a major storm. This reprieve from inevitable disaster has made Houston into one of the strongest and fastest growing economies in the world. It has also become the center for Western man's greatest technological achievement, the successful journey to the surface of the moon.

Houston, Tranquillity Base here. The Eagle has landed." So went the first words broadcast to earth from the surface of the moon. A future module beaming a similar message might well be greeted by a muted "Glug." The Johnson Space



The shaded portions of the Houston area will be up to 25 feet under the Gulf when a major hurricane hits Galveston.

"The only escape route from Galveston, IH 45, will be twenty feet under water at the height of a major hurricane."

Center, on the banks of Clear Creek three miles from Galveston Bay, is in the arc of subsidence. The downtown area of nearby Kemah is flooded by almost every high tide. The last topographic survey (in 1964) placed the space center between ten and twenty-five feet above sea level; Exxon's nearby Bayport industrial park is even lower. Since that survey the land has sunk almost two feet and is currently sinking three inches a year. The space center, Bayport, and the astronauts' homes in residential Nassau Bay are all certain to be under water when the next hurricane strikes. Spokesmen at the space center routinely deny that the \$524 million complex of highly sensitive electronic circuitry is endangered. The center, however, now has a geology office which has begun to make quiet studies on its own, working with the Bureau of Economic Geology of the University of Texas to chart subsidence-activated faults through aerial infrared photographs, and occasionally placing nervous telephone calls to the meteorologists at the National Weather Service in Galveston.

The nation's space showcase was built in such a vulnerable location because of the Byzantine connections between then Vice President Lyndon Johnson, George Brown of the giant Houston construction firm of Brown and Root, Humble Oil (now absorbed into Exxon), and Rice University. Humble donated the land for the space center to Rice on the understanding it would be offered to the government for the space site. It was a noble gesture, and fit well into Humble's plans to develop its other land holdings into a huge industrial and residential park. The optimism which surrounded these ventures thirteen years ago was unfortunately not disturbed by any serious study of maps or weather history. In fairness to all, however, it must be pointed out that the architects of our race to the moon were as unaware as most other builders of the period that their ultimate destination might be the bottom of Galveston Bay.

Build your house upon a rock, the Bible says. If this sanguine advice had been followed, no one should have built in the Houston-Galveston area at all. Underlying the earth surface are the remains of a river delta from the last ice age. In geologic terms the sediments are Pleistocene, Holocene, and Modern, which means they are comparatively recent, dating largely from the last 35,000 years. Bedrock these sediments are not; instead they are alternating layers of



The Kirkpatrick home in Brownwood: once elegant, now marooned.

clay and sand which are still being formed and which are inherently unstable. Such a foundation is the coastal equivalent of primary earthquake country, what the geologists call an "area of rapid and dramatic physical change. Some of this change would be occurring even without the unwitting intervention of man. However, locating a huge population and industrial center atop such a foundation has triggered its natural instability.

Houston is, in effect, in the wrong place. It is floating on a meandering platform of different soils and sands,



Texas won independence on this spot in 1836. Now it's under water.

the dominant soil being the fine-grained Beaumont clay. When large quantities of water are pumped out of the layers of sand which crisscross this clay and the other alluvial soils of the area, the result is the same as when a child squeezes a mud pie: the water oozes out, and the mud is compressed. When the vast mudpie under Houston was squeezed for water, it was compressed, and Houston began to sink. This sinking is irreversible. Instead of resting on solid ground Houston sits on a bowl of disintegrating Jello.

Subsidence caused by massive water withdrawal from regions of high compressibility has also nudged into activity more than 1000 miles of faults. These faults, which generally run parallel to the coast, range in displacement from several inches to eight feet. Such a fault has caused the variation in subsidence at the San Jacinto Monument, where one end of the reflecting pool has sunk three feet and the other end six feet. Faults run through the Gulf Freeway and make Route 3 between Webster and Galveston seem like a roller coaster ride. Faults traverse runways at Ellington Air Force Base and, in a burst of pixie-like defiance, cut squarely through the base engineer's office.

This faulting is a grave danger to the complex of pipelines and industries along the ship channel because it exacerbates the problems caused by relatively even subsidence; sewers, pipelines, foundations, sensitive catalytic units, and other highly sophisticated structures cannot survive faulting. As W. L. Fisher of the Bureau of Economic Geology says, "Faults are like slow-motion earthquakes."

The ship channel industries have by and large been slow to respond to the unfolding apocalypse they have set off beneath themselves. Delays by the industries in committing themselves to surface water (caused, they say, by unfair contracts pushed by the City of Houston) helped put the city's \$250 million Coastal Industrial Water Authority (CIWA) project almost two years behind schedule. The CIWA will bring about 166 million gallons of water a day, beginning in 1976, to industries along the ship channel and in Bayport. Almost half of that supply will only replace surface water from Lake Houston. Some industries, such as Armco Steel (which pumps more than nine million gallons a day from its wells), have so far refused to convert to the surface water, fearing that they would still be

(Continued on page 42)

at the mercy of the Houston City Council for their water rates. In any case, 80 million gallons of water a day is only 15 per cent of the amount currently being pumped in the subsidence area. While it may reduce the rate of subsidence, it is very doubtful that such a palliative will halt it permanently.

The CIWA has been a thorny rose in Houston politics for ten years, but only in the last few years has it been seen as crucial in the fight against subsidence. Instead of being beefed up to meet this new problem, however, it was in fact cut down—from an original estimate of 400 million gallons a day to less than 200 million. It will not serve industries on the north side of the ship channel at all, and plans to continue it down to the space center area have been abandoned. There were not enough commitments to use the water to justify the expense of providing it.

A primary dilemma is that surface water is three times as expensive as well water (sixteen cents per thousand gallons compared to five cents). In the absence of any state or national legislation, an industry's or municipality's conversion to surface water has been dependent upon its own sense of the larger public good. There was a lurking fear that competitors would not follow suit, making it difficult for public-spirited businesses and towns to attract profits or citizens, whichever the case might be. One rea-

son meaningful legislation has not been passed is the conflict between Gulf Coast legislators like Joe Allen of Baytown who seek underground water conservation laws and High Plains legislators who have opposed them (see page 76). Until these divisions are resolved, and until there is some effective legislation limiting pumping of underground water, subsidence is going to continue. Voluntary action has shown itself to be a slow and inadequate remedy.

But, while the political process has been slow and halting, some relief measures have been passed. The most important are the companion flood insurance programs passed in 1968 and 1969 by the U.S. Congress and the Texas Legislature. For the first time, property owners in areas subject to tidal flooding could obtain insurance; all that was necessary was that their city or county adopt building codes and other land use controls to regulate new construction in areas prone to flooding. Ah, there was the rub! Such regulations would limit the God-given right of builders to construct homes and commercial properties right on the water's edge, if they felt like it, or if they could find a (knowing or unknowing) buyer for them. Galveston County passed the appropriate regulations only to discover with some chagrin that almost the entire county was in the flood region; building came to a standstill. Harris

County delayed four bitter years before applying for the insurance in 1973.

Since roughly one quarter of the region's land area is in the flood plain, it is hardly surprising that developers and realtors are upset by the prospect of regulation and have used every means at their disposal to fight it. In Houston, land means money, but only if something can be built on it. Land-use regulations, whether local or throughout the coastal zone, might be absolutely necessary and sensible, but they clearly will not, in the short run at least, be profitable. Senator Lloyd Bentsen's son Lan is one of several developers touting Brazoria County on Houston's southwest fringe, as the next area for superdevelopment, although about 40 per cent of the county is in the flood plain. Another development like the Clear Lake area, with subdivisions and industry all clearly vulnerable to imminent destruction, would not be far-sighted or wise. Still, the energies for growth and expansion are seldom fettered by long-range thinking, and land prices in Brazoria County continue to shoot upward.

Insurance and building limitations are of course no use to Brownwood; The Corps of Engineers recently rejected suggestions that it erect flood protection devices around Brownwood. Instead, the Corps recommends that the federal government simply buy the

Beautiful. Not extravagant.

The charm of Colonial Spain. The comforts of home. Color TV. A swimming pool. All the little luxuries you expect in a fine motor inn. At a little price — you don't expect. Once you discover the comforts of La Quinta — you won't settle for less. Or pay more.

For reservations, use

telQuik

TOLL-FREE RESERVATION SERVICE

FROM OUT OF TEXAS 800-531-5900
FROM TEXAS CALL 800-292-5200



LA QUINTA — NOW IN THESE CITIES: TEXAS: Austin, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Dallas, Denton, El Paso, Ft. Worth, Houston, Irving, Laredo, San Angelo, San Antonio, Waco and Wichita Falls. NEW MEXICO: Albuquerque. COLORADO: Denver. ARIZONA: Phoenix, Tucson, Flagstaff and Kingman. LOUISIANA: New Orleans. FLORIDA: Orlando. OKLAHOMA: Tulsa. MISSISSIPPI: Jackson.

entire subdivision and bear the expense of relocating its 1500 residents, a course of action that would cost about \$15 million, compared to \$70 million to build a dike. Also, as we know, dikes are subject to subsidence; the lowest portion of the Texas City dike would now be inundated by Carla-size tides. The city of Baytown has tentatively agreed to work with this proposal by converting Brownwood into a park—a golf course, perhaps—so that it could be used and enjoyed as long as it remains above water.

There is something inexpressibly sad about these plans, as eminently sensible and humane as they are. Many of the families along Bayshore Drive in Brownwood—families like the Strattons, the Hartmanns, the Floyds—have lived the years from marriage to child-rearing to retirement in their well-kept homes. Their homes are more than physical residences, they are the repositories for the dreams, the changes, the experiences of a lifetime. And these are the people who have hung on, first in jaunty disregard for the rising waters and then in clenched-teethed determination. Today they are resigned. The situation is hopeless and they know it. The relocation will be an end to a whole part of Baytown, but it is a change, an amputation really, that people have come to accept.

Other people similarly endangered by subsidence are not accepting the ex-

tinguishment of their property so stoically. Smith-Southwest Industries of Clear Lake has retained legal whiz Joe Jamail to represent them and all others threatened by subsidence in their area in a \$25 million class action suit against Friendswood Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Exxon. The suit claims that the continued water pumping activities of Friendswood and channel industries have interfered with livelihoods and damaged the property of businesses and homes on the west shores of Galveston Bay and the north shore of Clear Lake. Jamail is serious about the case, and has completed deposition-taking and is preparing his brief. The suit will clearly establish a precedent: if a legal responsibility can be placed on the ship channel industries for the subsidence, then not only will the \$100 million in losses (to date) be on their backs, but so will the almost inestimable future damages.

All in all subsidence is on the verge of breaking into a major issue. R. K. Gabrysch of the U.S. Geological Survey, who began making subsidence studies in the region in 1962 and is the acknowledged expert, has suddenly found himself in demand. "From 1961 until 1972, I was working away, putting out reports, trying to get people's attention. I guess I spoke to public groups three times in those ten years. I felt like I was a voice crying in the wilderness.

No one wanted to listen. In the past year and a half, things have changed. I've spoken about 35 times and reporters have started coming to see me. I think we've got people's attention now."

Yes, Bob, you've got our attention now. So much so, in fact, that we listen with longing credulity to schemes as grandiose, and as farfetched, as the plans put forward to seal off North Vietnamese infiltration into South Viet Nam. "We'll build a wall around them," former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara once said, and actively considered. The same sort of approach at one time was considered for Galveston Bay. The Corps of Engineers was going to wall it off, build huge gates for the ship channel entrance, and seal the whole region off from hurricane tides. The result would have been about as successful as the attempts to keep out the North Vietnamese by building a wall in the jungle.

The next session of the legislature and of the U.S. Congress may see legislation introduced again, proposals ranging from tougher laws on underwater conservation districts to legislation implementing the Brownwood purchase. Certainly these efforts will be helpful, but viewed against the magnitude of the problem, and against the seemingly endless appetite for growth and expansion of the Houston economy and popula-



You come into town a little tired and you want to relax a bit and have a good meal. Come see us. Victoria Station. Perhaps the finest Prime Rib you'll see for a good while, cheerfully served in the authentic environment of an English railway station. When you've eaten with us, you'll remember us.



Houston
3015 So. Post Oak (near the Galleria)
7807 Kirby Drive (near the Astrodome)

Dallas
Cedar Springs at Routh
(near the Quadrangle)

Arlington
804 Highway 360 South



Outdoor Vacuum Eats Up Any Lawn Litter

- Leaves and twigs (80% faster than raking)
- Grass clippings (half the effort)

With 5 snout adjustments, Billy Goat cleans up and compacts all kinds of litter on lawns, patios, driveways, garages and around pools.

BILLY GOAT SUPPLY CO.
3751 Cavalier
Garland, Texas 75042
214/276-0581

BILLY GOAT SUPPLY CO.
3432 Yale
Houston, Texas 77018
713/869-5708

COLONIAL MOTORS
3219 Holmes
Dallas, Texas 75215
214/421-5293

The Ideal
Gift From
\$299.00



Eden Aluminium Greenhouses

THE FINEST GREENHOUSE FOR THE HOME GARDEN

FREE Delivery Anywhere in Texas

**outdoor
equipment inc.**

Call or write:

P. O. Box 42146
Houston, Texas 77042
PH: (713) 784-2560

Toll free call: 1-800-392-3340

tion, they seem puny by comparison.

This energy and expansion is evident along Texas Highway 225, which parallels the industrial complex on the south side of the Ship Channel and takes the motorist to Park Road 1836, which leads down to the Lynchburg Ferry and the San Jacinto Battlegrounds. Highway 225 is the closest thing Texas has to the otherworldly, wasteland landscape of northern New Jersey, where refinery after refinery has turned tidal flats into slagheaps dotted with maze-like futuristic structures, which convert raw petroleum into the many products our society is so clearly, and painfully, dependent upon.

This complex goes on for miles and miles, and leads right up to the graying limestone gates of the San Jacinto Battlegrounds, where in 1836 Sam Houston led a rag-tag army across a then empty plain to defeat Santa Anna and secure the independence of Texas. That plain has now sunk eight feet, and could sink as much as fifteen. More than five acres of the battlegrounds have disappeared entirely and the reflecting pool is now a shapeless lake reaching out hungrily for the road leading up to the 570-foot monument. Today it is impossible to drive the road leading to the main site of the battle—it is under water in three places, and in one of them a lonely sign barely protrudes from the water, proclaiming "No Fishing From Bridge." There is no bridge, only water. The famous San Jacinto Inn next to the Battleship Texas is now below water level, and only a dike keeps it from flooding daily. The Lynchburg Ferry a mile past the monument is closed again, as it often is these days, so that workmen can raise the road and berth yet another time. On the other side of the channel, at the opposite berth, only a system of dikes preserves the land. Houston and his men were headed for Lynch's ferry during that wild and decisive April 139 years ago; so was Santa Anna. Soon it will be gone.

From the backyards of many of the homes in Brownwood the owners had an excellent view of the monument and battlegrounds only three miles away across the ship channel. They could also see the continually expanding string of ship channel industries, marching up the channel, always on lower and lower ground, toward the monument. Like their own land, the battlegrounds were steadily sinking, doomed by the energies of a state that rag-tag army had helped establish almost 150 years ago. Subsidence has finally done what Santa Anna and his imperial army could not do—achieve victory over Texas soil. Soon there will be little, if anything, left of the battlegrounds. Tomorrow's children will have to find somewhere else to visit. ♣

BEHIND THE LINES

There is a natural tendency to wish a fellow Texan well in his bid for the presidency, to let the accidental relationship of regional geography lay claim to our loyalty and support. Lloyd Bentsen is running for president, and running hard, as contributing editor Al Reinert documents in "The Unveiling of Lloyd Bentsen," page 66. One reason Senator Bentsen is making this bid is his conviction that he is the best equipped to handle the difficult and complex economic and management issues which he feels are the major agenda for the America of the future. And indeed he may be right. Many of his Senate colleagues, even those for whom he has only marginal political affinity, think Bentsen has one of the finest, if not the finest, minds in the Senate. This distinction as possibly the brightest man in the Senate is one of the assets Bentsen thinks he has built up in the four short years he has been there. If competency is what the president needs, then competency is what Bentsen thinks he's got.

Competent management is, however, only part of what we expect from a president. He also should lead, inspire, and (hopefully) elevate this nation. The office is, after all, what Theodore Roosevelt called a "bully pulpit." Whether Lloyd Bentsen has the character to use this pulpit to lead us from the doubts, mediocrities, and traumas of the past fifteen years is still an open question, a question which, until it is answered, causes us to go slowly in yielding to our tendency to support the home-state candidate. That candidate's primary role, beyond the fatiguing, endless cultivation of political support, is to establish trust and confidence in the direction he will lead us, using as he goes those already proven executive abilities. We do wish Lloyd Bentsen luck, but we will be watching him closely—even more closely than the other candidates—in his efforts to prove himself worthy of leading this nation as it begins its bicentennial celebrations, celebrations which bring to mind American presidents—Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln—who make formidable comparisons to today's politicians. Lloyd Bentsen thinks he measures up. We shall see.

The cover for this issue was done by a young Texas artist named Justin Carroll who is currently studying at the Art Center in Los Angeles. Apologies are offered to Michaelangelo, but the quivering emptiness between the fingers of God and Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling seemed an apt metaphor for the distance Lloyd Bentsen still must travel—a distance now almost within touch but still too far to grasp.

Senior editor Griffin Smith, jr., became involved in a test of the new Open Records Act in the course of his story on the speed trap operated by the city of Selma ("The Perfect Speed Trap," page 60). The town repeatedly denied him access to its municipal budgets and court dockets, claiming that the material was unavailable or confidential. As we were going to press, Attorney General John Hill rejected Selma's contentions and ruled in our favor, holding that municipal budgets are public information and must be disclosed. We look forward to Selma's prompt compliance with this ruling, and will provide an updated account of Selma's operations in a future issue.

It is probably not a major victory to put an end to the secrecy and arrogance of a small municipality. The principle, however, is the same, whether the issue be the Watergate coverup or the coverup of a local speedtrap. Governments in their actions are accountable to the public and are a part of, and not above, the law. An important role for the press in a free society is to help make certain this fundamental tenet of our republic is honored, from the smallest municipality to the mightiest president. Only with such pressure do some public bodies and public figures become just that—public.

When I returned to Baytown for some preliminary work on what subsidence is doing to the Houston-Galveston area (page 77), I had a strange homecoming. We drove slowly through Lakewood (where I lived from age seven to age twenty-one), then through Brownwood. It was raining very hard, and the gray sky kept merging with the rough gray waters of the bays that surround the two neighborhoods (which, with Lynchburg, form the point between the San Jacinto River and the Houston Ship Channel). There was water everywhere, so much that at times it was impossible to tell whether we were truly driving on dry land. The waves from the bay were licking at our car; it was very unsettling.

So many of the places I had known as a boy and kept preserved in my memory had not changed, they simply had disappeared. Houses, trails, playgrounds, roads, parking lots—places where my friends and I had lived, played, worked, discovered teenage love and all the rituals of growing up—all were under water, all in the process of becoming oyster beds, shrimp-breeding grounds, or, more likely since they are so close to the ship channel, on their way to becoming lifeless mud. My friends have moved on, but many of their parents still live in our old neighborhood, in the parts that are not yet completely under water. By and large they are an interesting group of people, more touched by the larger ironies of life than are their contemporaries who have not shared this sort of modern torment of Job, not seen the work of a lifetime, a homestead wrapped with both material aspirations and personal memories, disappear steadily, inexorably, impersonally, beneath the waves.

In the great scheme of things the fate of Brownwood is not a large tragedy, not when measured against Bangladesh and Mozambique, the famines of equatorial Africa, and the destruction of whole cities in war. In a personal way, to me at least, it is no different, only on a smaller scale. In Viet Nam five years ago I was catching a ride on a helicopter that stopped to transfer some Vietnamese farmers from their bombed-out hamlet to a refugee center. One old man refused to go. He would not leave the spirits of his ancestors that kept watch over his grass-roofed hut. Finally he was persuaded to get on the helicopter, but he insisted on at least taking along his water buffalo. The helicopter was a CH-46 that loaded from an open ramp in the rear. When we were airborne again the buffalo pulled loose from the old man and charged out the ramp, disappearing into 3000 feet of space. The old man sat still for a moment, holding a piece of broken bridle. He then got up, slowly but before anyone could stop him, and walked out the ramp himself.

Driving through Baytown, in a rich and different culture unscarred by war, I knew something of how that old man felt.

William Broyles

TexasMonthly

PO Box 1965 • Austin, Texas 78767 • (512) 476-7085

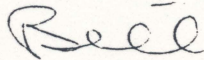
November 20, 1974

Mr. Bob Gabrysch
2318 Bron Holly
Houston, Texas 77018

Dear Bob:

Here is a copy of the magazine. Thanks again for all your patience and help. Naturally anything of value in it is to your credit; any errors are mine alone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Bill", written in dark ink.

William Broyles
Editor