

Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685-2003

Author: Cozine, Jr., James. J.

Contributor: Foreword and Afterword by Pete A. Y. Gunter

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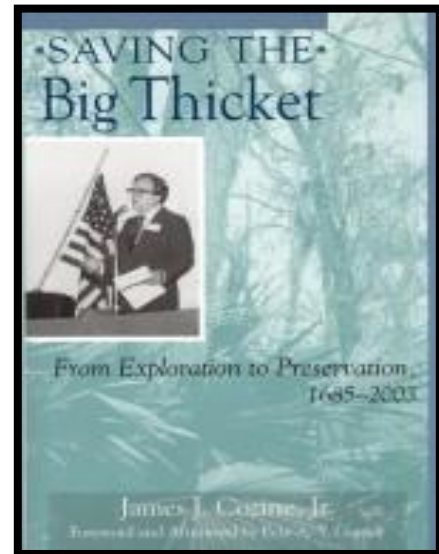
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**REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation,
1685-2003
April 2005, Environmental History, 10**

Review by Robert D. Baker, Professor emeritus at Texas A & M

Dissertations make good books. By the nature of the task, the author must write in an unbiased manner. The work is liberally researched with a large number of references and, if a contemporary topic, numerous interviews. If the author is well equipped to write, the book makes interesting reading. All this is true of *Saving the Big Thicket*, by James Cozine. The book is based on a dissertation completed in 1976; the book's date is 2004. But in the piney woods of East Texas the story of the Big Thicket Biological Preserve is a continuing one. The final product was not a national park, which had been sought for several decades in the middle 1900s.

The plan to preserve some of the Big Thicket area of East Texas spanned three centuries. The area had been utilized for commerce in three fields: forestry, oil and gas, and agriculture. *Saving the Big Thicket* is a chronicle of the effort to get a portion of the area- essentially from the private sector- into public ownership. Of the eleven chapters in the book, six are devoted to the historical record of the

Big Thicket area and five are devoted to the preservation effort. In addition, Dr. Pete A.Y. Gunter of the University of North Texas has written an afterword, which makes the story current.

Cozine gives a blow-by-blow account of the effort to preserve a portion of the Big Thicket of Texas. He has found ample references from both the pro and con interests represented by strong personalities on each side of the issue. To check the completeness of Cozine's effort, I concentrated on the chapter "A Timber Bonanza." I have used many references found by the author in separate investigations during the last fifteen years: Cozine found more.

A key to why it took so long to establish a preserve in the Big Thicket is found midway through the book: In 1970 the Park Service "refused to endorse the bill. Their experts simply did not believe that the Thicket met the criteria for a national park." (p. 142) The historical record of the physical area of the Big Thicket could have divulged this through the use of sequential aerial photographs dating from the late 1920s. The great extent of the early timber cutting and its logging railroad network, farming a activity, and oil and gas exploration would have been easily observed.

In recent years the National Park Service has sought buffer areas immediately outside national park boundaries. They attempt to get these from the private owners of the adjacent land. Until recently, the buffer function for the Big Thicket Biological Preserve had been performed by timber companies, at no cost to the federal government. Recently, much of the forest industry land has been sold. What will happen next is unknown. It probably will call for more federal appropriations for purchase of buffer land. In fact, in 2004 Congress approved \$4.5 million to expand the preserve.

REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket
Jan. 23, 2005, Dallas Morning News

Texas and Southwest Books: *Saving the Big Thicket From Exploration to Preservation 1685-2003*

James Cozine's 1976 environmental classic, *Assault on a Wilderness*, has been repackaged with an updated forward and afterword by Pete A.Y. Gunter, a past president of the Big Thicket Association and regents professor of philosophy at the University of North Texas. At one time, the Big Thicket covered more than 2 million acres and teemed with wildlife and rare plants. But by the 1920's much of

it had been destroyed by loggers, railroaders, oil drillers and settlers. In 1974, about 85,000 acres of the unique botanical region finally were declared a national preserve. The Big Thicket's relationships to Texas history and commerce are fascinating reading.

REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket
Abstracts of Public Administration, Development and the Environment, 29

The Big Thicket of East Texas, which at one time covered over two million acres, served as a barrier to civilization throughout most of historic times. By the 1920s, much of the wilderness had been destroyed through development. This book is a classic account of the region's history and a play-by-play narrative of the prolonged fight to save what remained from the original ecosystem.

REVIEW: Big Thicket Memories
Port Arthur News

The oil boom era brought myriad business to Sour Lake. There were 32 saloons and one church, according to James L. Cozine Jr. in *Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685- 2003*.

Mooch Prank, the prostitute with a heart of gold, passed the hat to help sick or injured drillers. Temporary blindness and bad eyes from the gasses often made oil workers have trouble reading the gauges. This rough-and-tumble life is part of the story in the University of North Texas Press book.

REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket
Midwest Book Review

Review by James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief

Originally written in 1976 (under the title "Assault on a Wilderness"), *Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685-2003* is the environmental saga of a ten- year war between conservationists and timber companies concerning the 84,550 acres of the Texas Big Thicket National Preserve. Chronicling modern history in an eminently readable manner, *Saving the Big Thicket* reveals in detail the issues advocated by both sides of the often heated controversy, and offers a handful of black-and-white photographs as embellishment. *Saving the Big Thicket* is a welcome and scholarly addition to

American conservation studies and environmental history shelves.

REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket
November 2004, Reference & Research Book News

Cozine (U. of Louisiana- Monroe) revises his 1976 dissertation *Assault on a Wilderness*, for Texas A&M University, completed in the aftermath of the 1974 creation of the Big Thicket National Preserve in southeast Texas. It chronicles interactions between the densely grown area and first humans then corporations over the centuries. Pete A.Y. Gunter (philosophy, U. of North Texas) updates the account in an afterword.

REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685-2003
Struggle for the Big Thicket Preserve
Review of Texas Books

Review by Patricia Heintzelman

In *Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685-2003*, James J. Cozine, Jr. details the struggle between preservationists and business interests over the use of land in the Big Thicket and the eventual resolution that led to the establishment in 1974 of the first such biological preserve in U.S. National Park Service history.

Cozine presents arguments from both the conservationists and the timber companies in an unbiased and detailed manner. With the growth of the East Texas paper mills, the timber industry promoted the concept of pine plantations and clear cutting the forest lands. They argued that the pine plantations were just another form of timber management. Limiting the pine plantations, the timber industry argued, would negatively affect the paper mills. Fear of jobs lost and economic hardships played a major role in their side of the debate.

The author also outlines the preservationists' argument for preserving large segments of the Big Thicket not only as a natural place of solitude and a necessary habitat for wildlife, but also incorporating into their cause a historical appeal for the preservation of a Texas wilderness. Seen through this historical lens, the Big Thicket served as a reminder of the difficult barriers the early settlers had

struggled against to settle the land. They maintained that such a struggle was “one of the dominant influences in molding the American character” (168).

Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation, 1685-2003 is a well documented account of the debate that ensued between business and preservation over the fate of the Big Thicket and would be an excellent reference to readers with an interest in the history of the Big Thicket as well as to conservationists or others curious about the process involved in raising awareness for the protection of wilderness and natural habitats.

Originally written in 1976 by Cozine, shortly after the creation of the Texas Big Thicket National Preserve in 1974, the text has been updated and now includes a foreword and afterword by Pete A. Y. Gunter.

**REVIEW: Saving the Big Thicket: From Exploration to Preservation,
1685-2003“All We Had Was Nuisance Power”
October 21, 2005, The Texas Observer**

Review by Char Miller

How to put this politely: Pet Gunter, a key figure in the preservation of the Big Thicket Preserve and, during the most intense phase of the struggle for its salvation, a frequent contributor to *The Texas Observer*, could be a real pain in the ass. By design: In 1971, when he became president of the Big Thicket Association, the young academic, schooled in the ways of movement politics, was convinced that he needed to “raise hell” on behalf of the endangered landscape. His agenda, James Cozine reports, was to unleash a stream of inflammatory rhetoric, hoping it would “irritate people into irritating their congressmen.” Fusing sectionalist resentments with a Populist suspicion of big business, he savaged the powerful timber companies for intensifying harvests in the Big Thicket, absentee landlords who by clear-cutting vast stands signaled their disdain for East Texas and East Texans. “These guys are carpet-bagging,” he declared before any garden club or chamber of commerce that would give him a dais. “They are northern companies, they’re destroying our wilderness, a unique Texas area.” This carefully crafted appeal came conjoined with a media blitz that made Gunter a ubiquitous figure on regional radio and local and national television, and every bit as omnipresent in small-town newspapers and big-city dailies; lucky audiences even got to hear this one-man band pluck out a bluesy tune, culminating in a plaintive eco-wail: “What are you going to do with your quiet hours, when there’s nothing left but plastic flowers?”

This multi-media attack put the Big Thicket right where Gunter wanted it, at the center of public debate and popular consciousness. As he drew national interest to the cause, he also got certain people's back up, most notably the timber companies and their flacks. Their angered response, he reasoned, was to the good, for their blundering kept the story of this imperiled rural terrain before urban environmentalists who would pressure their representatives, expanding the numbers committed to the Big Thicket's preservation. "Please understand," Gunter said in a 1998 oral history taken by the Texas Legacy Project, "[I] didn't save the Big Thicket. It was Pete Gunter plus Bob Eckhard, plus Ralph Yarborough, plus Maxine Johnston, plus Lance Rosier, plus Alan Steelman, plus all kinds of people, even John Tower. That diverse list of players, which included sportsmen's groups and women's clubs, is a major reason why in 1974 President Gerald Ford signed off on an 84,550 acre Big Thicket National Preserve, the first such biological preserve in the National Park Service; and why, seven years later, UNESCO added its imprimatur by naming the Big Thicket an International Biosphere Reserve. Participatory democracy had carried the day.

Or at least it carried *that* day. As Cozine, and Gunter, in his afterword to *Saving the Big Thicket*, make clear, the fight simply to gain a hearing for the unique landscapes and complex biota in southeastern Texas was matched, after the preserve's creation, by an ongoing need to secure funds necessary to make it more than just a "paper park." It took 26 years for the long-touted Visitors' center to open its doors, while extending the preserve's protections to an ever-widening buffer zone has required Herculean effort and increased costs. In July 2005, Congress provided another two million dollars for additional purchases. Gunter details each step of these post-1974 engagements, and although his catalogue-like account of how (nearly) every parcel was secured does not make for light reading, it is important for two reasons. No national park or preserve is sacred, none is inviolable. Part of what to date has secured the Big Thicket is that most of the adjoining land was in the hands of timber companies. But as the National Parks Conservation Association pointed out in January 2004, when it added the Big Thicket to its list of endangered national parks, 1.5 million acres of timber-company lands surrounding the preserve were up for sale; the organization worried that if it were sold to housing developers or new lumber companies, which might be much less committed to long-term sustainable management of abutting woodlands, these changes might undercut the preserve's capacity to serve as a repository for biological diversity. The other reason why Gunter's listing is so essential is that it testifies to the need for sustained partnerships, both local and national in constituency, that cross partisan boundaries (note Yarborough's and

Tower's role in the preserve's creation) and that, now and again, deflect the inevitable class between capitalists and conservationists. Gunter and the timber beasts, for instance, went after one another publicly, but at critical points each knew how to compromise. Arthur Temple, of Temple-Inland, one of the region's biggest landowners, did not oppose the preserve, and Gunter and his peers curried the powerful owner's favor, who in turn chastised them for lambasting the lumber industry as "Robber Barons." *Saving the Big Thicket's* very publication is a byproduct of the unusual political alliances and personal relationships that the book depicts: a grant from the Temple Foundation to the University of North Texas Press has underwritten the Temple Big Thicket Series, of which this is the fourth volume.

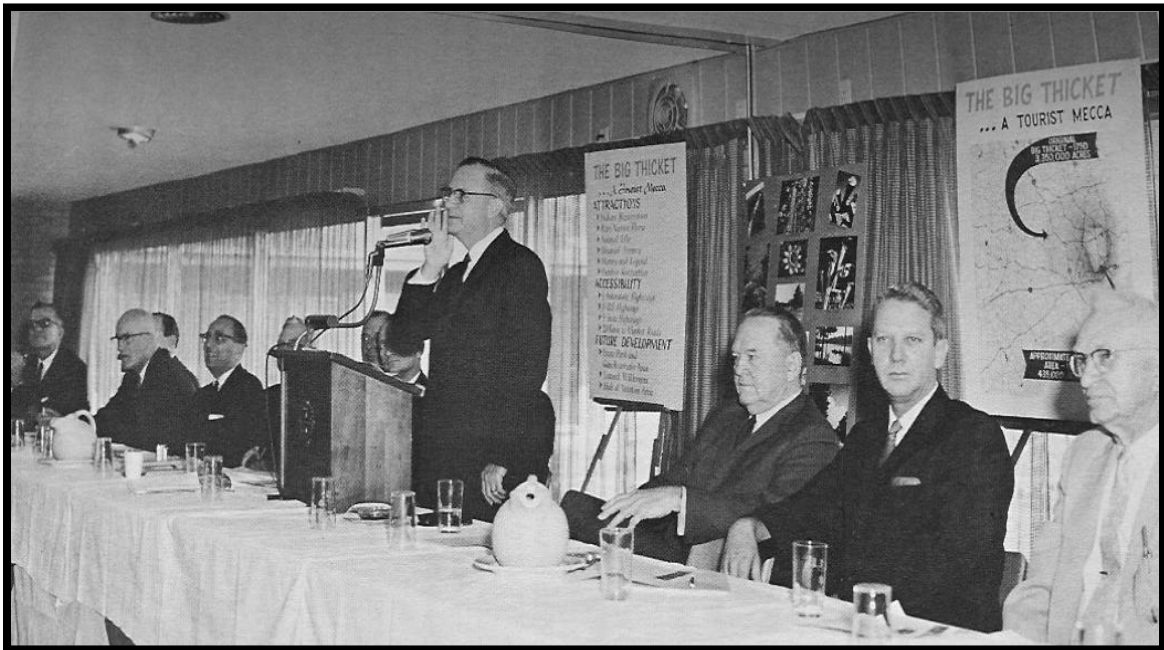
Yet why publish this particular manuscript? That seems an especially relevant question, given Gunter's two major books on the subject, *The Big Thicket A Challenge for Conservation* (1972) and the *Big Thicket: An Ecological Revolution* (1993). One blurb makes the case, breathlessly; "Cozine was on the scene while the smoke from the big battles still hung in the air, talking to both conservationists and timber industry people." That *Saving the Big Thicket's* relevance depends on its one-time contemporaneity might suggest that it's dated. Certainly it is an odd book, in form and focus. A 1976 Texas A&M doctoral dissertation, it seems not to have been revised for this published version. Its dedicatory words ("This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Sharon..."), like its chapters denoted in Roman numerals, attest to its unaltered state. So too does the difference between the current and original title, "*Assault on a Wilderness*." The latter is far more consistent with the book's intellectual tone and temper, revealing as well just how much wilderness studies have evolved since Cozine first ventured into the Big Thicket war zone.

Then, the human presence in nature was inevitably styled in oppositional terms: We had no place in wilderness, which by definition was a landscape devoid of all human impress. The proof text for this assertion is Genesis: Unable to live in a perfected state, Adam and Eve were tossed out of Eden and into an imperfect world of their creation. We've been wandering ever since, lugging along those Romantic redactors (Wordsworth and Keats), and their Transcendental acolytes (Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir), whose paeans to the wild, free of humanity's depravity, updated the Biblical narrative. Offering sophisticated revisions of this Edenic formula were the most influential postwar scholars in American Studies, Henry Nash Smith (*Virgin Land*, 1950) and Leo Marx (*Machine in the Garden*, 1964). Cozine does not cite them, but he has absorbed the enduring argument about original sin. How else can you explain the first three chapter titles- The

Indians' Assault- which presume a uniformity of environmental impact that is swiftly undercut in the first two instances when the author's evidence indicates that by "assault" he means mere presence, for neither the native peoples nor the Spanish modified in a sustained way the lands they inhabited.

Anglo occupation of southeastern Texas did not come with such a light touch. Initially settlers bypassed the region seeking easier ground to break; Gideon Lincecum, for one, noted the Big Thicket's impenetrability: "It perhaps surpasses any Country in the world for brush... and is so thick that you could not see a man 20 yards for miles." By 1850, though, more than 10,000 people, of whom a third were slaves, had settled in the area, a number that swelled upward to 26,000 by 1870; timber started to fall as homesteads and communities arose. But the 1880's arrival of a railroad sparked a "timber bonanza," marked by grand fortunes, oppressive company towns, and restive labor, a boom-and-bust cycle, accompanied by social inequities and resource exploitation, that was replicated in the early twentieth century when oil was discovered. In the Big Thicket, some had made good on Stephen F. Austin's vow to redeem "Texas from the wilderness."

GUNTER AND THE TIMBER BEASTS... WENT AFTER ONE ANOTHER PUBLICLY, BUT AT CRITICAL POINTS EACH KNEW HOW TO COMPROMISE.



Texas Governor Price Daniel Proposes State Park, 1962



First President of the Big Thicket Association, Dempsie Henley, with U.S. Senator Ralph W. Yarborough and Charles Wilbanks

This scholarly addition to American conservation studies and environmental history shelves outlines the heated controversies and ensuing political struggle that ultimately resulted in the creation of America's first National Preserve.

Mary C. Johnston, Kountze ISD Educator and BTA President 2011-12

Big Thicket Association formed in 1964



Pictured above are the members of the newly organized Big Thicket Historical Society. Standing: Rep. Emmett Lack, Rev. Leon Unger, Mrs. Laurel Mitchell, Mrs. W. E. Coon, Mrs. D. V. Oliver, Mrs. W. E. Jordan, D. V. Oliver, W. E. Coon, Harold Filligim. Seated: Lance Rosier, Mrs. Peggy Foster, and Carl Sory. (PINE NEEDLE STAFF PHOTO)

At the second meeting, the name changed from Saratoga Historical Society to Big Thicket Association. Lance Rosier was Acting President.