

What Did the Hill Country Look Like Before Europeans Came Here?

A friend of mine and I were discussing that topic recently and it occurred to me that other folks might be interested in it as well.

The problem is, there are a lot of common myths about that subject that one still hears even today. One is that the Hill Country used to be a “Sea of grass.” Another is that “Cedar was not here originally and it was imported.” Anyone who has read enough of the writings of the many explorers and settlers who were among the first Europeans to see the Hill Country knows that neither of the above are true.

These myths are often perpetrated when a person hears someone describe the pre-European Hill Country by emphasizing a single aspect, but then that person repeats what they heard as though it applies to ALL of the Hill Country.

Here is how this happens. A European explorer travels west from East Texas and upon arriving somewhere in what we now call the Hill Country and seeing a large expanse of prairie, writes about it in his journal and calls it a “Sea of Grass.” He doesn’t describe the trees, because he has been traveling through wooded territory for weeks. Then a modern-day speaker, looking for a quotation to make a point about the early Hill Country, finds the explorers writing and repeats the “Sea of Grass.” A listener then remembers that phrase better than whatever else the speaker says, and then repeats it over and over to everyone he/she talks to. Myth created.

Just because the Hill Country had some areas that could be described as a “Sea of Grass,” or having “Grass as high as a saddle horn,” doesn’t mean that all of the Hill Country looked like that. Likewise, when some explorers described encountering cedar thickets, what many of them described as “cedar brakes,” doesn’t mean that all of the Hill Country looked like that either.

Here is a quotation from Ferdinand Roemer in 1846, describing a short trip he took with Ferdinand Lindheimer from New Braunfels, “Our path led us again past the springs of Comal, but suddenly ascended the steep, wooded slope of the hill.... The cedar trees which covered the slopes exclusively, formed an impenetrable thicket through which a path had to be cut.... As soon as we reached the summit of the hill, the cedar forest ended. An open, grassy plain, only broken here and there by brushwood and scattered live oak trees, spread out before us. It extended to Mission Hill about two miles distant...”

So what did the Hill Country look like back then? Perhaps the best description I can give is to quote my friend Steve Nelle who wrote, “The Hill Country did contain areas of open grassland, but these were in combination with large areas of savanna, shrubland, woodland and forest. The landscape was complex and diverse, not uniform or homogeneous. The arrangement of different soils and topography, mixed with the varying effects of fire, resulted in what can only be called a dynamic mosaic of many vegetation types.”

How would I describe the pre-European Hill Country? I was say, “In general, on average, there was more grass, taller grass, less bare ground, fewer trees, less cedar, and more springs and seeps than we see today. There would have been a greater diversity of vegetation at all levels, from ground to crown, with little or no browse line. There would have been occasional buffalo herds, periodic fires and many more predators.” And I add to that the phrase from Nelle above, “a dynamic mosaic of many vegetation types.”

When settlers arrived with their livestock, which continually overgrazed the land, they altered the species and the amount of grass cover in many areas. They also shot predators to protect their livestock and fought wildfires (having only settled areas after the Native Americans were driven out also resulted in a reduction in the number of grass fires). These human-caused changes in the ecosystem resulted in greater woody plant, especially cedar encroachment, onto previous grasslands.

In spite of all the above changes caused by European settlement, the Hill Country is less-altered by humans than any other part of the state except perhaps for the Trans-Pecos. The Hill Country, with its thin rocky soil and steep hills has proved largely unsuitable for farming, so much of the native habitat that was here before 1800 is still present today, although the relative abundance of some species may have changed.

I hope we can protect what we have.

Until next time...

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