



INSIDE AUSTIN'S 325

*Fear,
loyalty and
the winds
of change
in a
bellweather
political
precinct*

BARTON HILLS Elementary is modern America's version of the little red schoolhouse. Each weekday, cherubic commuters spring from their mothers' stationwagon carpools and flock dutifully inside to absorb the rudiments of new math, good citizenship and old English.

But several times every two years, Barton Hills makes a majestic transformation from an institutionalized learning center into a bastion for American democracy. Exercising a 200-year-old constitutional prerogative, residents from the surrounding South Austin neighborhood converge here to fight city hall, decry high taxes, protest inflation, contain communism, modernize education, end war, stop corruption, get the rascals out and put their champions in.

As both a voting place and community schoolhouse, Barton Hills Elementary extends an essential function to the citizens of Austin Precinct 325, a carbon copy of thousands of other neighborhoods across the country. It is the kind of neighborhood which most Americans know best — a collection of ranch-style houses on

tree-shaded lawns, reverberating on Sunday mornings with the staccato whine of edgers and lawnmowers. The people who share its boundaries are, with a few exceptions, white, middle income, Protestant, and — at least from a political standpoint — representative of the country at large.

It is what pollsters and politicians describe as a "bellweather precinct." During every election since the late 1960s, the vote in Precinct 325 was virtually identical to that of the state or nation, a fact which makes it a statistical microcosm of the larger population. National television crews selected it as a key precinct during the 1972 presidential election to compile instant election returns. Polling experts, armed with their omnipresent clipboards and questionnaires, comb 325 for weeks before each major election to gauge which way the wind is blowing. As housewife Beth Sebesta says, "We're so average, we're unaverage."

Few other precincts have just the right ingredients to attain bellweather status, and consequently, 325 is a statistician's delight. Here, the term

By Dave Montgomery/Photos by Ray Adler



"mixed neighborhood" applies to political, rather than racial differences — 43 percent conservative, 30 percent liberal, 27 percent moderate. Republicans account for about 20 percent of the neighborhood population, mirroring their underdog status on the state level. There are mossbacks and flag-wavers, longhairs and bleeding hearts. There are Briscoe boosters and Farnthold fanatics. There are McGovernites and Nixonites, the silent majority and the vocal minority.

The diversity of political thought is evident in the bumper stickers on parked cars and the actions of their owners at election time. For some, politics is a result of heritage — Mrs. John Conn, a descendant of Austin's prestigious and politically oriented Faulk family, is irrevocably liberal and Democrat. For others, politics is acquired — James and Beth Sebesta joined the Republican cause as college students during the placid days of Eisenhower and remain fiercely loyal through the tumultuous era of Watergate.

Political opposites like the Conns

and Sebestas, however, share a peaceful coexistence in the serenity of Austin suburbia. The majority of their neighbors don't know — or could even care — that living in Precinct 325 makes them unique. Liberalism and conservatism, Watergate and war, Democrats and Republicans all take a distant backseat to the routine but basic issues that play a more important part in their day-to-day lives.

The gut problems that stir the neighborhood into protest are those closest to the home — lack of sidewalks on Barton Skyway, inadequate bus service, encroachment of apartments, redistricting of high school boundaries. Politics notwithstanding, the residents of 325 display a bipartisan kindredship in seeking to protect their neighborhood from the erosive forces of urban growth that have left their toll on other Austin neighborhoods.

Austin's rapidly changing population patterns, in fact, have already claimed one bellweather precinct that was even more classic than 325. So

classic, for example, that Time Magazine used the voting results from the North Austin community as the basis for changing its 1952 presidential election cover from Adlai Stevenson to Dwight Eisenhower. Today, that precinct is just an ordinary neighborhood, and the same forces which robbed its special status now threaten 325. "We used to have something all to ourselves here," laments Democratic precinct chairman Edward Putman. "Now I'm afraid we've been discovered."

The discovery is understandable. Precinct 325 has plenty to offer, and there are plenty of takers to answer the call of real estate brokers and far-sighted apartment developers. Rising and falling like a magic carpet along rock-ribbed hills which dot Austin's southwest perimeter, Precinct 325 is an urban dweller's oasis, situated within eyeshot of the state capitol and out of earshot of noisy traffic patterns. Its closest link with neon clutter is Lamar Avenue, a brawling stretch of bars, takeout stands, service stations and signs offering everything from "Imagination with Plaster" to "Avocados — Four for \$1."

Although six blocks of Lamar comprise the community's eastern

The gut problems that stir protest are those closest to home.



Exploring the simpler lifestyle in Precinct 325: (from left) school kids arriving at Barton Hills Elementary; voter registration campaign in a laundromat; Joy Parker enjoys the Austin spring with sons Darren and Brent.

boundary, the remainder of Precinct 325 possesses a rural-like quality, giving it a certain autonomy from the rest of Austin — as Putman describes it, “a feeling of isolation.” Deer and rabbits graze on rolling, wooded landscapes, while Zilker Park to the south provides a weekend mecca for college students, frisbee-tossers and fresh-air enthusiasts. Commercialism has yet to penetrate the residential austerity of 325, where home prices seldom dip below \$25,000.

Until recently, Precinct 325 suffered — or as its residents would argue — benefitted from the step-child image attached to the larger portion of South Austin. But as the northward growth began to ebb, the migration of people and prosperity shifted southward, bringing new development and new faces. Massive clusters of apartments and duplexes now rim the southwestern edge of 325, drawing a transient influx of college students, military personnel from Bergstrom Air Force Base and young marrieds on the way up. The result gives Precinct 325 a divergent mixture ranging the spectrum from young and old, rich and not so rich, involved and uninvolved.

One of the involved is Mrs. Conn, a rapid-fire, non-stop talker regarded as one of the neighborhood's most distinguished citizens. She is the daughter of former Austin Judge Henry Faulk, and she remembers with vivid clarity the days when her fami-

ly occupied the mansion that now houses Austin's Green Pastures Restaurant. Today, as the wife of a savings and loan president, Mrs. Conn is an untiring crusader for improved care of the deaf, a vocal women's rights leader and a die-hard loyalist of the Democratic party.

“I am a Democrat,” she declares. “A McGovern, Parenthold Democrat. Some of our best friends are Republicans, but I'm a Democrat, I always have been, and I always will be.” Her staunch partisanship, however, is not unanimous throughout the Conn household. Her husband styles himself as an independent, a man who votes for the candidate and not the party. Rather than risk division in the home, the couple avoids all discussion of election issues, adhering to Mrs. Conn's belief that “differences over politics and religion can do more damage than any other subject.”

But outside the house, Mrs. Conn pursues her party causes with unwavering intensity, helping provide the impetus which makes the liberal Democratic faction the best-oiled political force in the precinct. “I cannot separate politics from everyday life,” she declares. “I work and I work, and I vote and I vote, and my man never wins. But one of these days, I'll get lucky.”

At 58, Mrs. Conn is the antithesis of the precinct's typical liberal Democrat, who is more likely to be a student or college professor from the University of Texas. The growing student and faculty migration accounts for the precinct's mushrooming liberal strength, a trend which will one day erase the bellweather pattern if it continues at the present rate.

Not all of the students who make their way to Precinct 325, however, are cut from liberal cloth. Frank and Darlene Jones style themselves as “pretty conservative” and fled to one of the neighborhood's apartment complexes to escape the atmosphere of campus life. “We came out here to get away from the students,” complains Jones, a wiry 24-year-old law student from Plainview. “But obviously, we didn't succeed.”

The sharply contrasting lifestyles of the younger apartment dwellers and the older homeowners create a kind of neighborhood generation gap. To the post-40 set, the community social whirl evolves around the Barton Hills Garden Club, St. Marks Episcopal Church and the neighborhood PTA. To the student set, the

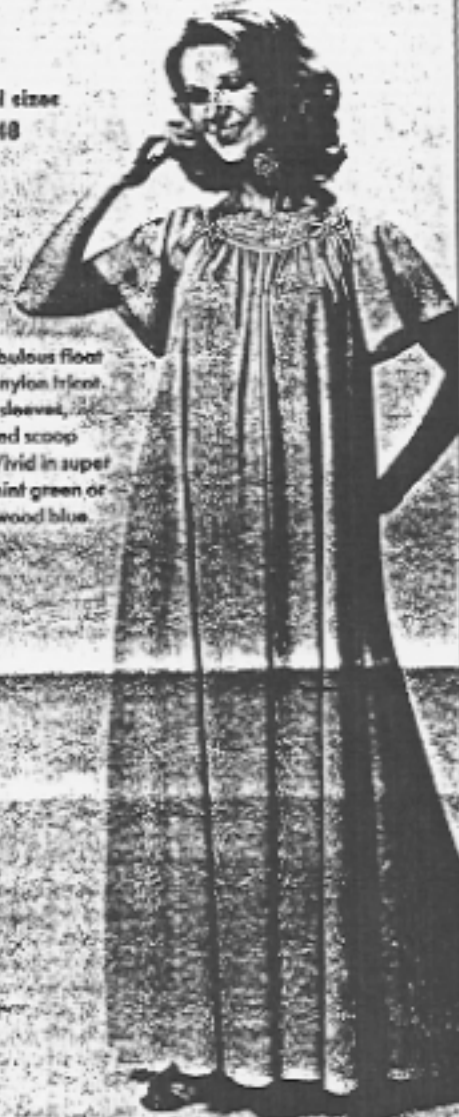
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Austin: The diffusion of people and ideas creates melting pots.

social hub is the apartment pool or outside the neighborhood, along the campus area.

"We're evolving into a mixture now," says Edward Putman, a UT economics teacher who has been the Democratic precinct chairman for more than a year. "Once we were a self-contained unit, isolated from the rest of the city. Things were slower then, and we liked it. Now the tremendous upsurge in growth is changing our old autonomous image. We're not as remote as we used to be."

Putman, now 49, moved his wife and son into the neighborhood more than a decade ago, before freeway development and the southward expansion of business and commerce began changing the population makeup of South Austin. In addition to the new student population, pockets of Chicanos and blacks are sprouting up

on the outskirts of the precinct and could ultimately cut into the neighborhood to give it an ethnic as well as a political mix. Presently, Precinct 325 is virtually all-white, although a few Chicanos, including legislative candidate Gonzalo Barrientos, live just within the precinct boundaries.

The diffusion of people and ideas creates political melting pots such as the 2600 block of Rockingham, which is home for two liberal graduate students, an elderly conservative Democrat and a Republican family.

The Republicans are the James Sebastas — he's a 40-year-old electronics engineer, and she's a 38-year-old social worker and housewife. And both, says Beth Sebastas, are "sincere Republicans" whose party roots began taking hold when they were teenagers.

Their political philosophies and courtship were both spawned in what Mrs. Sebastas describes as "the do-nothing era" of the late 1940s and early 1950s. They met under unfortunate conditions as patients at a children's hospital, where he was being treated for polio and she for a spinal ailment. Later, as students at different colleges, they were influenced by the isolationist conservatism of the times, particularly by the activities of Texas Democratic Congressman Wright Morrow, who led the state's congressional delegation out of his own party's national convention in support of Eisenhower. They remain faithful to the GOP today, despite the anguish of national scandal.

(Continued on Page 17)



Two political lions in Precinct 325: Democratic precinct chairman Edward Putman and Mrs. John Conn, who strongly believes in crusading for causes.

The urban gremlins are headed for 325.

The rambling home on the corner has been the Sebestas' castle since they moved to Austin in the mid-1960s from the Dallas suburb of Richardson. Like other big-city migrants who escaped the hectic adversities of metropolitan life, they extol the virtues of Austin with glowing praise. They recall with bitter anguish the endless traffic snarls, the soaring crime rate, the umbrellas of pollution and other daily agonies that blemished their life in the Dallas metropolis, and they are woefully apprehensive that the same gremlins will invade the Utopian paradise of 325.

Nevertheless, the first troops already are crossing the border. Each day, speeding construction trucks roar along nearby Barton Skyway, posing both a safety hazard to the Sebestas' two pre-teenage children and an indication that the development boom is showing little signs of decreasing. Other unwelcome visitors also have apparently discovered 325 - Mrs. Sebesta recalls a total absence of crime when the family moved in nine years ago, but just a few months ago one of their neighbors was mugged in his garage. "I'm afraid," she laments,



James Sebesta: a 40-year-old engineer who remains faithful to the GOP.

Beth Sebesta: a 38-year-old social worker who says, "We're so average, we're unaverage."



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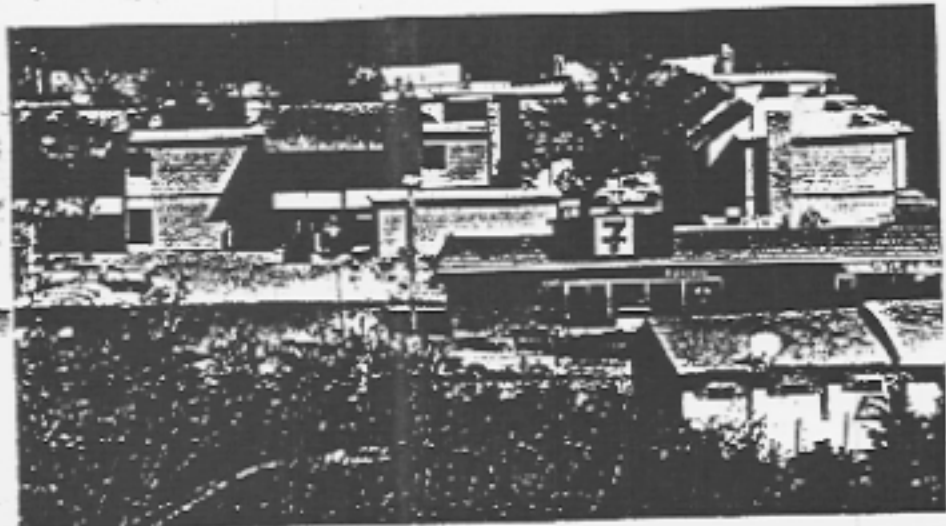
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that being on the map isn't always a
good sign.
James Dyess, a geologist for the
State Water Development board, also
has noticed the change. "We used to
be a little pocket of people who were
here because we wanted to be," he
remembers. "Now we've had so many
people moving in and moving out,
we're just not the same. And it's not
necessarily good."

The not-so-subtle changes infiltrat-
ing Precinct 325 provide the catalyst
that turns ordinary suburbanites into
political activists. Mrs. Joe Guedea, a
raven-haired and willowy mother of
two, threatens with increasing fre-

quency that she will run for the
school board one of these days to
eradicate what she feels is blatant
unfairness by the Austin school sys-
tem toward the neighborhood school
children. As a result of a controversial
redistricting order, high school stu-
dents are now bused across town to
the inner city Austin High School in-
stead of the closer Crockett. That and
more routine education problems in
the neighborhood stir Mrs. Guedea to
furious protest. "I harass the school
board all the time," she asserts. "I'm
not going to sit here and let them
put the screws to me - some day."

*Someday the changes
will erase 325's bellwether*



A study in contrasts: the 7-Eleven with its neon sign and canoes on Barton Creek.

when I get my kids raised, I'm going to be on that board."

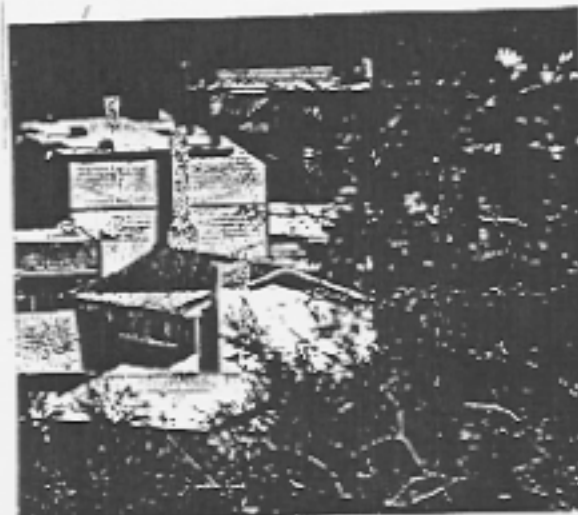
Her diminutive features offer a deceptive veil to what are obviously deep-seated feelings. In contrast to the "McGovernite, Farmhouse Democrat" leanings of Mrs. Conn, Mrs. Guedes is a "Nixonite Republican."

"Sure, I voted for Nixon," she declares. "He was the lesser of two evils. The other was McGovern, and I wasn't ready for the hippies to take over - I still believe in haircuts, I still believe you should have your ears clean, I still believe you should take baths."

Jim Antunes, 35, ecologist. At 37, he is a successful ecologist, the father of two boys and a girl and an arch foe of the neon sign on the newly constructed Seven-Eleven Store, the skeletal frame of a future apartment complex and an equally new dry cleaning establishment. He is a self-designated enemy of the urban sprawl and vocal champion of trees, curbless country style lanes and anything green and growing. "We have a delightful neighborhood out here," he declares with parental pride akin to a chamber of commerce booster. "And now, the integrity of that neighborhood is being threatened by change. We don't

mind change, but it's not orderly. We're afraid of what it will do." But, good or bad, the change is coming, bringing with it a potential facelift that will erase Precinct 325's special bellweather status and make it just another cog in the wheel of urban progress. The clipboard-carrying pollsters will cease their biennial pilgrimage, the national television crews will look elsewhere for the typical American vote. Precinct 325 will no longer be average. It will just be ordinary.

ther status.



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