

Canyon Country

by Joe Herring



Several years ago, I emailed a friend with a simple question: “do you know a geologist who could explain why the hill country has hills?” I was hoping to talk to an expert, someone with “credentials” who could tell me in a scientific way how the hills we call home were formed.

I was sure there would be an interesting theory as to why we have such lovely hills here.

So you may understand my consternation when I received the expert’s reply. Out of the ether it came, a simple question that puzzled me upon first reading.

“Probably the bigger question is: why do we have canyons?” she wrote.

Her thesis was simple: the hills all around us were the result of water and wind removing tons of material, like Michelangelo freeing a goddess entrapped in marble. What we see today – the hills – are the forms of geology that were made of harder stuff, or stuff farther from running water.

I received this at my cluttered desk at the print shop and remembered the photograph that

hangs behind me. It is a large panoramic, taken from south of the river looking northward, showing the town nestled in the comforting arm of the Guadalupe River. My friend’s observation is proven by the photograph. The hills in the distance form a flat horizon, as flat as any on the plains. Down here in town, we’re in the part that’s been eroded away. The river and the wind have cut through layer upon layer of softer material, and our town is down among the excavations, in the strata of an ancient sea-bed, built upon fossilized silt and muck, and the shells of ancient sea creatures.

If we live in canyons, they’re subtle ones. Here and there one can find a bluff or solid rock canyon wall; FM 1340 toward Mo-Ranch offers a few dramatic examples, especially just past Wagon Wheel Ranch. The other geologic material was much softer, and left rounded canyon walls. We call them hills. Others might call them terraces.

Either way, they’re pretty. So, if you want to confuse distant friends, visitors, or strangers, you could always introduce yourself as being from the Texas Canyon Country. Because, in a way, that’s where we live.

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