

# Note

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## Historical Observations of Droughts and Floods in Austin, Texas: An Interview with Dr. Jack Schneider

*Interview by Brian Butler Hunt*

### **Preface:**

*Photographs can help us understand the gravity of devastating natural, and human-influenced, disasters. I showed an iconic drought photo at a talk I was giving at the La Querencia retirement community. After the talk the son of the man who took the photograph I had shown contacted me. I knew very little of the photograph and so I was eager to learn more. The result was a long discussion with Dr. Jack Schneider, a long-time resident of Austin, about water in Central Texas (**Figure 1**). Highlights of that discussion are provided below in an interview format.*

**Figure 2** is the photograph that initiated this interview—it's the photograph that Dr. Schneider's father took of a young man (his friend Emory Hughes) straddling the Colorado River during the drought of 1917--just upstream of where the Tom Miller Dam is today. There were no dams functioning at that time, so the diminished flows seen in the photo represent actual river flows. We can assume that without the dams, the 2009 and 2011 low flows would be equivalent or lower than what is shown in the picture. In addition, Dr. Schneider witnessed the 1935 flood as an 8-year old boy from the south bank of the river along Congress Avenue--similar to the view shown in **Figure 3**. The devastating floods of 1935 were again repeated in 1936, and then in 1938 until the Highland Lake system of dams were built in the early 1940s.



**Figure 1.** Dr. Schneider holds the photograph his father took of Mr. Emory Hughes (age 16) in 1917 as he straddles the Colorado River. Learning more about this photograph is what initiated the interview. The interview occurred on September 30, 2013 at the La Querencia, west of Austin. The transcripts and recordings were submitted to the Austin History Center.



**Figure 2.** *Photograph of Mr. Emory Hughes (age 16) straddles the Colorado River in Austin Texas in 1917. Mr. Hughes is wearing his St. Edwards ROTC uniform. The photograph was taken by Mr. Schneider about where Enfield Road meets the river. Photography courtesy of the Schneider Family and the Austin History Center.*



**Figure 3.** *Photograph looking north along Congress Avenue during the flood of June, 1935. Photograph courtesy of the Austin History Center PICA 22060. The two-story house in the foreground still stands today as an engineering office (907 S Congress Ave). The two-story structure in the middle of the picture surrounded by flood waters, was called South Austin or Ward Body Shop at the time of the flood. Today, the building (220 S Congress Ave) contains various commercial tenants.*

**Interview:**

**Brian Hunt (BH)**- I guess if you don't mind, starting by talking a bit about yourself.

**Dr. John (Jack) Schneider (JS)**- I am known as Jack. I laughingly tell my patients when I introduce myself that John signs the checks and Jack is your buddy. I was born May 18, 1927. We went through the depression times and my daddy had a grocery store. You may know the history of the old Schneider store and all that business. The Schneider family was four brothers and when my grandmother and granddaddy had died and they were selling the estate and my granddads store, they talked my daddy into running the store and handling the properties. All of my knowledge is from my dad. During the depression I grew up in Travis Heights and we had a store out there in addition to the old Schneider store at Second and Guadalupe.

**BH**- Was your father a photographer? (*referring to figure 2*)

**JS**- No, no. When he grew up he went to St. Edwards High School, up on the Hill. So the picture that you see was when he was in the ROTC at St. Eds. That's right. (Referencing photograph of soldier straddling river). We have always been told, and I have no reason to doubt it or question it. We had the original picture of that, Ellie did. That was about 1917, and so dad would have been 16 or 17 years old. That picture is of Mr. Emory Hughes. Mr. Hughes, one of the Hughes family, had a huge ranch at the Marshall Ford/Mansfield Dam area. When school was out on weekends or during the summers they would hike up the dry river bed, the (Austin) dam was out at that time and hadn't been rebuilt, and there was drought. What he's straddling there is the Colorado River, and you can see there is not much water coming down there. And that is what I'm concerned about today. Is that there is such inadequate water coming into Lake Travis and Buchanan today. There is not enough water there to take care of the City of Austin and all these people that they are bringing in here out of California and everywhere else. And incidentally, these people don't understand our local environment and the encroachment of the Chihuahuan desert coming this way. People have no concept of that, and I've found that since I lived here (Querencia). I have the same picture here; we gave the original to Mrs. Hart at the Austin History Center. Ellie took it down there and said that's where we need to put the picture. So that's the dry river bed and that's roughly where Enfield Road or Windsor Road area comes down to the river. I tell people it was near the Garcia or Morrison estate.

**BH**- It's a fantastic photograph, so your dad when he was 16 must have had a camera.

**JS**- Yes, he must have had one of those old box cameras.

**BH**- Yeah, it illustrates the concepts true then and true today. It is a wonderful picture that I was glad to hear you knew something about it.

**JS**- When my grandfather died--a little more of my background--his sons were helping my grandmother settle the estate. They owned a general store and they found a lot of IOUs and notes from people. He would grubstake people who didn't have cash. One of the notes was secured by a cotton gin in Elgin or Manor; I don't recall which one, or a pecan grove on the Colorado River on Thurman Bend. Have you ever heard of Calcasieu Point?

Ok, that is Thurman Bend. If you go there, Mr. McCombs has a big development there now. The brothers took that Pecan Grove as security on the note. The man couldn't pay it. They were trying to help my grandmother. Instead of the cotton gin. They were smart, as cotton went out about that time. As it turned out though the value of the pecan grove went in 1935. The pictures I have here of that terrible flood. Ok? It wiped out 75% of the pecan trees. Then, I believe it was in 1937 there was another flood that took almost the rest of those beautiful pecan trees. I remember walking down in those trees; it was like walking beneath the big ones at Barton Springs that was the way that whole mile of river front used to be. The family used to camp down there and I remember so well I swam in the Colorado River. You could walk across it in on the rocks; it was a narrow spot in the river. That was the Thurman Bend road that forded the river.

Floods of 1935. Do you have those pictures? I lived in Travis Heights and my dad had a store at 1200 South Congress near the Deaf School. I stood on the Colorado River on the street. This photo is before it came up really high.

**BH-** Well, this is (a photo of a flood in) 1936.

**JS-** I don't know whether that is true or not. Something is not right about that (referencing the picture of the Colorado River flooding along Congress, dated 1936). That may not be marked right. This is what I remember (looking at aerial picture of flood along Colorado River and Congress). Travis Heights incidentally, that's a mistake people make, does not come down to Congress. It doesn't start for about ½ mile to the east (of Congress).

I stood right here, this is the deaf school, I stood right here as a little boy and watched the dirty roiling water churning carrying trees and houses. There used to be a motel or tourist court right here. Mr. Odam (?) Crockett owned them, I believe, and the flood took all of them out. The only thing that stood up was Ward Body Works. That's the concrete building that still stands today. This is the Congress Avenue Bridge. It came right to the bottom of that. This is my granddaddy's store, somewhere here; it was about 2 ft or so up into the store (pointing to along 1<sup>st</sup> street).

The Dams incidentally were not built for water supply for Austin, but for flood control. Everybody says we should watch the water level in the lakes, and that is true, and we should be glad to have them. I stood right along here. I was 8 years old. I bet my folks didn't let me get too close.

**BH-** After the flood you mentioned the pipes were severed to South Austin.

**JS-** The Norwood's had a 2 acre estate. That is today where people walk their dogs (Dog Park at Riverside and IH-35). They had a 2 acre nice estate, pecan trees and things like that. My mother out of High School was Mr. Norwood's secretary. We would go down there and have free use of their pool. But during the flood, since there was no water, they filled their swimming pool up (with their flowing artesian well) and the fire trucks in south Austin, this all according to my memory, pumped water from the pool into the pipes so folks could use their utilities. It was not potable. There was an artesian well there. I've told you about it. *(BH note: it is well state Well No. 58-51-103, 1600 ft deep, producing from the Middle Trinity Aquifer, TDS = 1238 mg/L).*

**BH-** You also mentioned Stacey Pool and St. Edwards had artesian wells.

**JS-** That's Travis Heights, which ends at the (Blunn) Creek. There's a well at the State Capitol building. My dad swam at St. Edwards. My dad learned to swim in the river where the railroad bridge is.

**BH-** My grandfather (Mike Butler) told me that the railroad bridge was the only bridge to survive the various floods.

**JS-** Judge John Brady is year older than I am; he lives out somewhere near Brodie Lane. John's a fine man. His daddy was a doctor, lived in Travis Heights, and used to walk the railroad bridge morning and nights to go to and from the office.

**BH-** Did you go to Barton Springs very often?

**JS-** I lived down there in the summer time. Everyone did. You paid to get in on the north side, and the south side you sneaked in. You road your bike, parked, and ran down the hill and spread a big blanket. In the winter time you'd go swimming and 2-3 guys would hold a blanket up and you'd change into your bathing suit—the cold—then you'd run down the hill and jump in. It's the same temperature year round. I haven't been back since college.

*--Gap in the recordings--*

*I recall Dr. Schneider discussed a visit he and his father would take out to Hamilton Pool to visit the Reimers. He mentioned that floods or high-water crossings of the creeks in his father's car was a problem. The fan would hit the water and splash the water into the distributor cap or other parts and kill the engine. He recalled his father loosening and removing the fan belt as the crossed the creek and then reattaching it on the other side of the creek.*

*The discussion ended on more recent water policy, and family history etc.*