

# How Not To Do a Hydrologic Dye Study, Or, How I Screwed Up Again Without Even Trying

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On December 31, 1981, with the best of intentions and permission from all governmental agencies representing Central Texas, Mike Dorsey and I dumped red water-traceable dye into Barton Creek just upstream from the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. The purpose of the dye dump was to document the time of travel from the injection site to Barton Springs—part of a US Geological Survey study with the City of Austin. An Austin American-Statesman newspaper reporter caught us in the act and published a photo and story of the injection on the front page of the paper's January 1, 1982, issue.

Prior to the injection, I had to offer my life as collateral to several City of Austin officials as a guarantee that the dye would not cause any Austin water bodies to appear as “Big Red” soda. I convinced the officials that the dye would redden water in upper Barton Creek, would disappear into the Edwards Aquifer, and then eventually discharge at Barton or Deep Eddy Springs, diluted to the point where it would be invisible but detectable with instruments.

After dumping the dye I went home with a false sense of security that I knew what I was doing.

On January 1, 1982, I was having a quiet New Years Day lunch at home with family when my phone rang. It was Dr. Maureen McReynolds (Director, City of Austin Environmental Resource Department) who politely informed me that the city had a report that a portion of Town Lake was red in color. Slightly less politely, she then asked why my dye was in Town Lake. I tried to assure her that the “red” in Town Lake was not our dye. She told me the City was sending inspectors to visit and sample Town Lake. I asked her if she wanted assistance, to which she replied “No—you have done enough.”

A short time later I received another call from an agitated lady who told me her dog “Panda” had jumped into Town Lake and exited pink in color. She had seen my photo on the front page of the newspaper, looked up my phone number, and wanted to know if my dye would hurt Panda. I thought about denying that I had dumped dye into Barton Creek but the photo on the front page of the newspaper represented a rather large obstacle to that defense, so I told her the same story I told Dr. McReynolds.

A while later, I received a call from an American-Statesman reporter who asked me the same questions I heard from Dr. McReynolds and Panda’s owner. I tried unsuccessfully to convince her that I had nothing to do with a red Town Lake.



After she hung up, I immediately went into seclusion and waited for the angry mob that was surely on their way to tar and feather me. I also considered leaving the country under false credentials and applying for the Witness Protection Program.

After a restless night of nightmares that my blood would be contributing additional red color to Town Lake, I awoke early the next morning (January 2), and drank a cup of coffee as I read the newspaper. To my shock, on the front page was a photo of pink Panda and its owner. Although it has been many years since this incident, the stains still exist where I spit coffee on the wall opposite my kitchen table.

Additionally, the article stated that “Slade denies that the red Town Lake is from his dye”. I received many calls that day—none were flattering. One person stated that the red dog obviously was due to my dye

because he compared the photo of Panda’s color with the photo of the dye from the previous day’s newspaper. I unsuccessfully tried to explain that such evidence was not very scientific.

Late afternoon on January 2, I received a call from Dr. McReynolds—she said she had good news. I responded that I hadn’t heard good news for many days. She then informed me that the red liquid existed only in Town Lake near the mouth of Shoal Creek. The inspectors noticed the water in Shoal Creek and adjacent banks also were red, so they followed the red color up the creek where it disappeared at a drainage pipe coming from the basement of a recently abandoned building. Further investigation discovered that the building was recently abandoned by the Austin American-Statesman who had moved to their new location east of Congress Avenue on the south shore of Town Lake. As it turned out, a drum of red printing ink had been knocked over and leaked through a floor drain into Shoal Creek.



Later I received a call from the American Statesman—they apologized for indicating me as the probable source of the red liquid in the lake. With my spirits and confidence restored, I asked if they would print the truth about the dye source so that I could remain living in Austin. They stated they would; however, their article appeared the next day on the back page of the City State section of the newspaper, so I don't know how many people saw it. To this day, I still don't know what happened to the dye from my test; however, I expect any day to receive a call that many red salamanders were found dead at the bottom of Barton Springs. This incident occurred 26 years ago, but my paranoia causes me to believe that some people still blame me for the red Town Lake. Worse than that, I occasionally have the feeling that Panda the red dog is hunting me down to seek revenge.

# Town Lake spill traced to old newspaper plant

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By KERRY GUNNELS

American-Statesman Staff

The source of a mysterious purple gunk that stained the shores of Town Lake and closed a city water treatment plant was traced Saturday to an overturned barrel of printing ink in the old *American-Statesman* building.

The ink leaked through a floor drain into the city's storm sewer system and flowed into Shoal Creek between First and Second streets, officials of the city industrial waste control department said.

Newspaper officials said the purple ink was petroleum-based and described it as non-toxic. They estimated that 20 gallons escaped before the drain was plugged.

George Greene, city water superintendent, said Saturday the water treatment plant on Town Lake would remain closed until Monday, when EPA toxicity reports on the printing ink would be available.

Greene closed the plant Friday when the origin of the purple substance was unknown. City residents are being served by two other water treatment plants that draw

from Lake Austin.

Reports Friday evening that the purple substance also was flowing from storm sewers at 24th and Fifth streets turned out to be erroneous, attributed to the darkness.

Carol B. Cook, environmental health specialist for the Austin-Travis County Health Department, said the spill did not pose any special health hazards.

The unoccupied *American-Statesman* building at 308 Guadalupe was sold last summer, but the new owners have not taken possession.

The newspaper's general manager, Clayton Frink, Saturday accepted responsibility for the cleanup.

"Apparently, ink that used to belong to us somehow found its way into Shoal Creek and Town Lake and we're very, very sorry," Frink said. "If the city will tell us the best way to clean it up, we'll do it."

Allowing such a material to escape into the sewer system is a violation of the city's industrial waste ordinance, but Cook said no decision had been made to file charges.