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LBJ and the Texas Hill Country

What exactly is the Texas Hill Country?

Many Texans believe that the Hill Country is the best part of the Lone Star State. Certainly it is "deep in the heart of Texas." It has a distinctly western feel, a hardscrabble land of scattered cedar, pecan, and oak trees. Geologists call the region the Edwards Plateau, whose raised limestone strata have been incised with canyons and crisscrossed by caves carved by millions of years of erosion. The Hill Country offers scenic entrance points, for it is set off by an escarpment that rises from the plains north of San Antonio and west of Austin. Indeed, if you fly in a westerly direction over central Texas, you can observe the abrupt change in land use from a quiltwork of cropland on the coastal plain to dark green forests alternating with open pasture in the Hill Country. Every April the land bursts into bloom with Indian paint brush, bluebonnets, and other wildflowers.



The Hill Country has not just a vivid natural history, but a fascinating human history. In the mid-19th century, once the Comanche and other Indian tribes were removed from the Hill Country, a variety of ethnic groups of European origin settled there: mostly people whose ancestry was English, Scottish, Irish, German, and Czech. They mixed with people whose ancestry was Mexican (Texas had been a state of Mexico until 1836), and African. During the Civil War, a large number of Hill Country Germans opposed Texas's entry into the Confederate States of America and fought battles on Texas soil on behalf of the Union.

In this independently spirited place, Lyndon Johnson was born on August 27, 1908. His father, a Texas legislator, and his mother, a college-educated teacher, lived in the heart of the Hill Country, near the hamlet of Stonewall, Texas, about an hour west of Austin by car. His ancestors had pioneered the land, and as a child growing up he heard about the hardscrabble existence that they eked from its stoney soils. He also learned of how his ancestors had driven cattle on the Chisholm Trail, which runs past the Hill Country. He knew rural poverty first hand growing up, and worked his way through Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos, at the edge of the Hill Country; his compassion for others in economic distress sharpened when he taught students of Mexican descent in the little town of Cotulla, not far from the Hill Country.

So the Hill Country is the land that formed the man who would grow up as our nation's last pioneer president. During boyhood he would have learned much about the American experience in a land that was part Southern, part Western, and formerly Spanish and Mexican. He would have been steeped in its fiercely independent way of life. He would have heard the colorful lore of the cowboy way. And he would have known rural isolation and poverty.

After 15 years on Capitol Hill, first as a representative then as a senator, Johnson bought what was called "the old Martin place" on March 5, 1951. The 246-acre spread was near his birthplace and from 1963-1969 would serve as the Texas White House. There was some political calculation in the purchase. As civil rights heated up, LBJ wanted to downplay his Southern roots and emphasize his Western sensibilities [1] But there can be no mistaking that he loved the Hill Country. Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson called their ranch "our heart's home." It was a sacred refuge.

The 36th president explained what the land meant to him:

"I guess every person feels a part of the place where he was born. He wants to go back to the surroundings that he knew as a child. This is my country, the Hill Country of Texas. And through the years, when time would permit, here is where I would always return, to the Pedernales River, the scenes of my childhood. There's something different about this country from any other part of the nation. The climate is generally pleasant. The sun is generally bright. The air seems to be always clean. And the water is pure. The moons are a little fuller here. The stars are a little brighter. And I don't know how to describe the feeling other than I guess we all search at times for serenity, and it's serene here. And there's something about this section that brings new life, and new hope, and really a balanced and better viewpoint after you've been here a few days." [2]

Since you mention Robert Caro, it should be said that he is convinced the Texas Hill Country had an unusually strong influence on Lyndon Johnson the man and politician. He observes that LBJ "came out of the Hill Country *formed*, shaped -- into a shape so hard it would never change." [3] When Caro writes in his magisterial multi-volume biography of LBJ that knowledge of the Hill Country is crucial to understanding the 36th president, he backs the assertion up. He and his wife Ina are from New York City, but they spend many months at a time in Austin doing research at the Johnson Library, and walking the land that Johnson knew, loved, and identified with as a Texan.

(Question from Vera N. of Los Angeles, CA)

[1] Hal Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), pp. 52-63.

[2] My appreciation to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, and to the National Park Service, Stonewall and Johnson City, Texas, for providing the audio file of LBJ's oral interview.

[3] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, vol. 1, *The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 201.