

Naturalist Armand Yramategui, 1923-1970

James Herzberg

The environmental movement in Houston in the 1960s owed much to the example and activities of Armand Yramategui, curator of the Burke Baker Planetarium. Active in the preservation of open beaches, wilderness conservation, the defeat of an environmentally destructive and expensive water plan, and public education, he helped bring ecological awareness out of small groups of sportsmen and nature lovers into popular and political arenas. A shocking and brutal murder in 1970 cut short his flourishing career, but his life and accomplishments inspired others to work for his same, fundamental objectives.

Armand's unusual last name (pronounced ear-ah-MAT-ah-ge) is Basque, containing a lyrical symbolism entirely appropriate to a conservationist: the inspiration or exhilaration a person receives when he reaches the top of a mountain and looks down on an impressive sight. His father's parents had moved from Spain's Pyrenees to Mexico City. In turn, his father Casimiro immigrated to Houston, settling in a Mexican American neighborhood on the north side and working as a machinist with the Southern Pacific Railroad.¹ His mother's family had deeper roots in Mexico, in the Monterrey area, yet she and her family had to flee north during the Mexican Revolution.² In Houston, she and Casimiro met and married, rearing their two sons, Armand (born March 2, 1923) and Hector.

With a mother having deep family ties in Mexico and a father of Basque descent, Armand's Hispanic heritage was clear. He grew up in a Mexican

James Herzberg holds a doctorate in history from the University of Texas at Austin and a law degree from the University of Houston. He is currently an attorney in Houston. He has previously contributed articles on the development of the Gulf Freeway and on the preservation of Armand Bayou to *The Houston Review*.

¹*Houston Post*, June 29, 1969.

²Sarah Emmott, longtime friend and associate of Armand Yramategui, telephone interview with author, Houston, Texas, February 22, 1986; Victor Emanuel, naturalist and past associate of Armand Yramategui, interview with Sarah Emmott, June 5, 1980, Armand Bayou Nature Center, Pasadena, Texas. Mrs. Emmott collected numerous materials and interviews with people who knew Armand. The author is greatly indebted to her efforts.

American neighborhood and spoke fluent Spanish. But he was also a native Texan and even a native Houstonian. All of these ethnic distinctions probably did not play a large part in Armand's outlook or activities. A man of his warmth and universal interest in all creatures must have been at least intuitively conscious of how such emphases can sometimes sharpen differences and deepen isolation, but to Armand, people were people, taken on their own terms, without preconception.

As Armand and his brother grew older, they proved themselves able students and hard workers. Their father, himself self-educated, encouraged their interests and discipline. Every summer, the two brothers had to spend at least two hours in the house each day, reading or learning something new. At the same time, their father taught them mechanical and vocational skills, such as roofing and car repair, at which he was adept. Neither son disappointed him, as they both fulfilled his fondest wish for them in obtaining a college education. After brief military service, Armand graduated from Rice Institute in 1947 with a degree in electrical engineering, and Hector completed a degree in geology from the University of Texas at Austin.⁵

Once out of college, Armand moved to Mexico where he joined a partnership in radio manufacturing. The venture proved unsuccessful, however, and he returned to Houston within a few years. For the next several years, he managed his family's rental property and considered new career directions.⁴ At this point of uncertainty in his life, Armand very unexpectedly found his purpose. He purchased 10 acres of bayou land in the vicinity of T.C. Jester Boulevard. Wanting to know how to identify the trees on the property, he began attending meetings of a local nature study group, the Houston Outdoor Nature Club. When the club sponsored a bird-watching field trip, Armand accompanied them, quite prepared for personal amusement at the intense enthusiasts. Instead, he himself became fascinated. In due course, he became an assistant scoutmaster for the Boy Scouts and served as president of the East Texas Ornithological Society.⁵ More and

⁵*Houston Post*, June 29, 1969; Sarah Emmott, "Conservation Hall of Fame: Armand Yramategui, 1923-1970," *The Houston Sportsman*, May 1981, 11-12.

⁴Hector Yramategui, telephone interview with author, Houston, Texas, February 24, 1986; Tony Alvarez, cousin to the Yramateguis, telephone interview with author, McAllen, Texas, February 24, 1986.

⁵Hector Yramategui interview; Emmott interview with author; *Houston Post*, June 29, 1969. Armand was also an officer and organizer of the Houston Chapter of the National Audubon Society and an active member of the Texas Chapter of the Nature Conservancy. *Houston Audubon Society Bulletin*, November 1974.

more, he based his career in nature studies and conservation. This work became his life.

In one respect, this newfound absorption was surprising. As a boy Armand had collected rocks and bugs, memorably bringing home on a few occasions a coral snake, a black widow spider, and a tarantula, but had never shown any sustained interest in the natural environment. He had never even been a Boy Scout.⁶ Yet in other respects, this course was entirely typical and inevitable, for as a person, he was never bored with life. Friends were always impressed with his great enthusiasm and range of interests. He was, for example, a devoted baseball fan, while also maintaining a regular attendance at the symphony and opera.⁷ Given his breadth of interests, few felt they knew him completely and most conceded they saw only certain phases of his life. As one long-term associate described this quality, he was a very "private person in a public arena."⁸ Possibly only the study of nature could encompass all his diverse interests. He became a true ecologist, who studied interrelationships, and became interested in people as they related to ecosystems.⁹

Developing this avocation, Armand initiated an intensive self-study program, becoming proficient in botany, ornithology, conchology, and ecology. He purchased more land with the goal of shaping its environment and later selling it to developers as an illustration of balancing ecological and human needs.¹⁰ He began taking trips to Central and South America, fascinated with the tropics and their richness of life. He had a special curiosity about tropical birds, perhaps sensing the same type of vibrancy that he possessed.¹¹

Naturally, a man of such energy and growing conviction about environmental issues soon became politically active. In 1959, the *Houston Chronicle* noted when "Armand Yramstegui" [sic] decried the pending establishment of a second golf course in Memorial Park with the attendant destruction of numerous trees.¹² He gave monthly reports on conservation topics before

⁶*Houston Post*, October 16, 1972; Emmott interview with author.

⁷Sarah Emmott, recorded talk to the interpretive guides, Armand Bayou Nature Center.

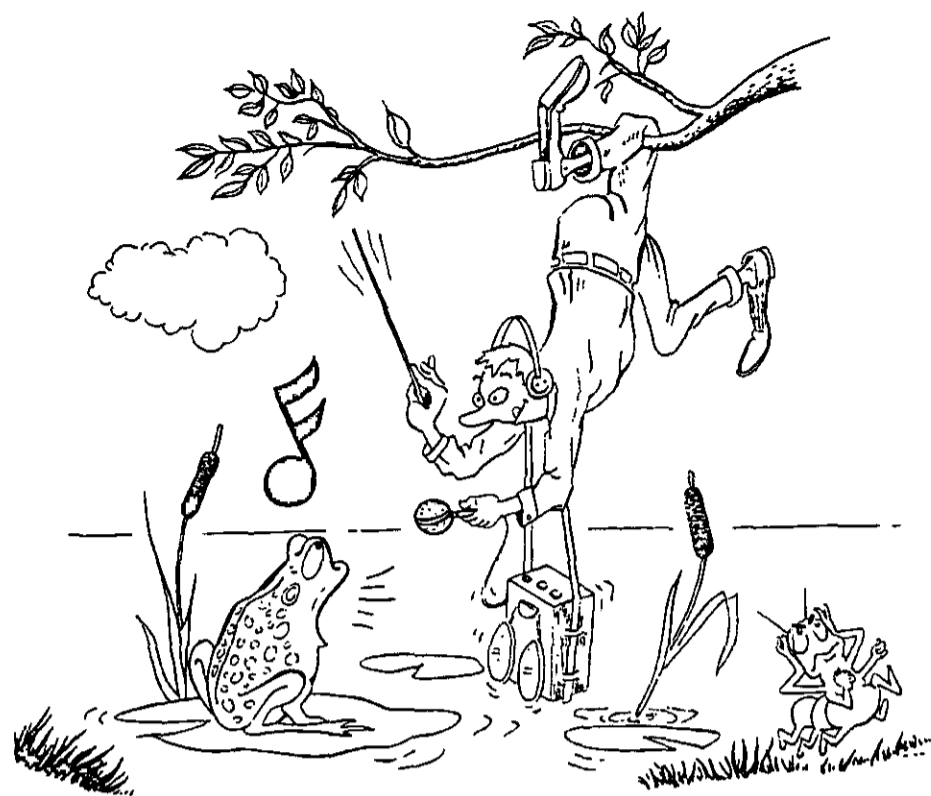
⁸John Tveten, free-lance nature photographer and friend of Armand, interview with Sarah Emmott, April 9, 1981, Armand Bayou Nature Center; Emmott interview with author.

⁹Maurice Arnold, land management consultant and former associate with Armand, interview with Sarah Emmott, February 13, 1980, Armand Bayou Nature Center.

¹⁰*Houston Post*, June 29, 1969.

¹¹Emanuel interview.

¹²*Houston Chronicle*, May 22, 1959.



Armand Yramategui kept this cartoon, captioned "Armand in Action," on his office wall.

the Outdoor Nature Club and started contacting state and national representatives about pending legislation.¹³ With the aid of an ad hoc committee bearing the ambitious label of Texas Beaches Unlimited, he mobilized enough public support to secure passage of the Texas Open Beaches law, which preserved shore access for the public.¹⁴ He next transformed the Texas Beaches Unlimited committee into the Texas Conservation Council, with himself as president. With this base, he appeared with increasing frequency before legislative and congressional committees, testifying on behalf of such goals as the Padre Island National Seashore, the establishment of the Big Thicket National Preserve, stronger water and air pollution control laws, and protection of submerged lands.¹⁵ In the late 1960s, he and others campaigned successfully to defeat a poorly considered and unrealistic water plan that would have increased dependence on out of state sources, offered little estuary protection, and cost billions.¹⁶

In these activities, Armand displayed a growing capacity to promote causes in which he believed. Essentially a gentle and pleasant man, he could be a tough fighter in the cause of conservation. To his considerable knowledge on a given subject, he added a strong sense of integrity, never taking a position unless he honestly believed it would be the best course for all concerned.¹⁷ Armand was not driven by the ego needs often characteristic of people heavily involved in politics. He remained personally unassuming, but strongly determined in promoting his conservation goals.¹⁸

He could also demonstrate a real shrewdness in negotiating. Perhaps this quality stemmed from his land dealings and business experiences. He was able, for example, to persuade the same lumber companies opposing him in the battle to save the Big Thicket to contribute to the campaign to defeat the proposed Texas Water Plan.¹⁹ Friends who accompanied Armand to Mexico on nature trips remembered his facility for securing special

¹³Emmott, "Conservation Hall of Fame," 11.

¹⁴Sarah Emmott, recorded remarks at the Armand Yramategui memorial service on January 27, 1980, Armand Bayou Nature Center. The statute itself is now §61.011 of the Texas Natural Resources Code. See also Bob Eckhardt, "Open Beaches," *Parks & Recreation* (August 1970): 21-23 for an account of the passage of the legislation.

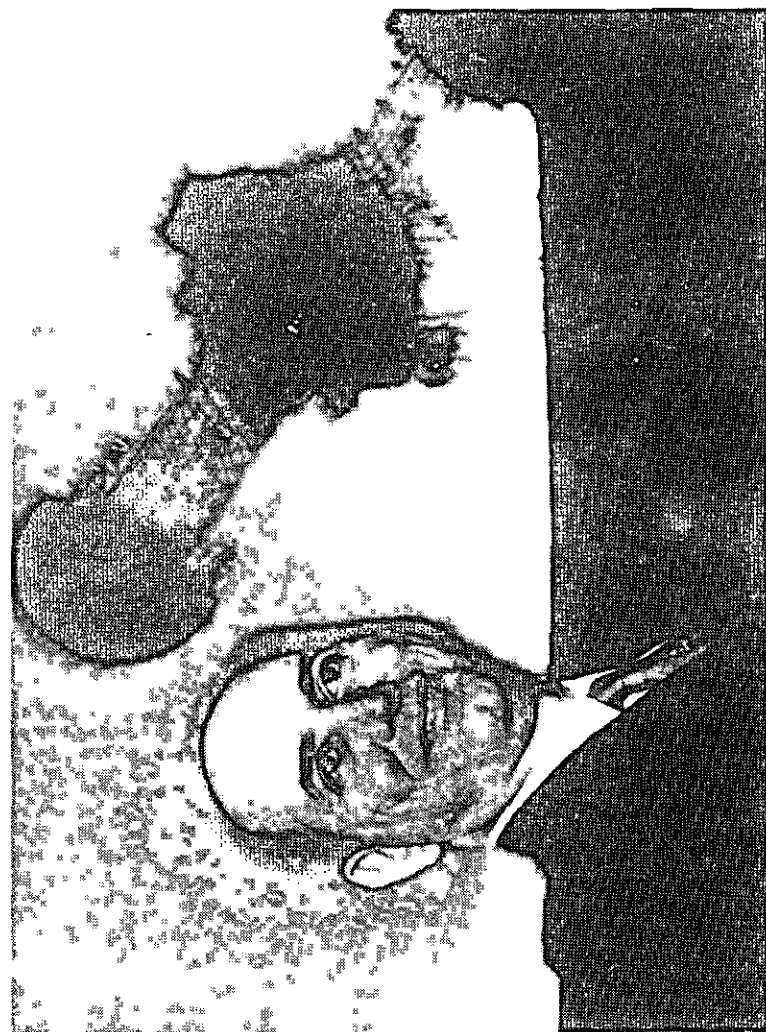
¹⁵*Houston Chronicle*, October 19, 1970; *Houston Post*, October 17, 1970.

¹⁶*Houston Chronicle*, August 4, 1969; Emmott, "Conservation Hall of Fame," 12.

¹⁷Carl Aiken, longtime friend of Armand Yramategui, telephone interview with author, Houston, Texas, February 21, 1986.

¹⁸Emanuel interview.

¹⁹Hana Ginzburg, co-campaign worker and later prime mover in creation of Armand Bayou Nature Center, interview with author, Bellaire, Texas, February 26, 1986.



Armand Yramategui as curator of the Burke Baker Planetarium.

favors from the Mexican bureaucracy and his earnest, if often unavailing, efforts to further conservation there.²⁰

On the basis of these consuming avocational interests, Armand joined the staff of the Houston Museum of Natural Science in 1963 as a natural science teacher. In 1965, with the resignation of the curator of the Burke Baker Planetarium, Armand succeeded to that position. These posts gave Armand the platform he needed to promote his beliefs and interests. He became a frequent guest on the KTRH radio educational talk show, "Anything Goes." He was also a regular respondent to a question and answer column, WATCHEM, published by the *Houston Chronicle*. He contributed several stories to the newspapers on such events as comet sightings, bird-watching, or reported spacecraft flybys.²¹

Although he proved to be an excellent teacher in his public appearances and presentations at the planetarium, the facility had not come easily to him. Armand's first appearances before the Outdoor Nature Club seemed nervous and uncertain, as he tried to control his eagerness.²² A year spent teaching at Bellaire High School allowed him to improve his skills. By the time he joined the museum staff, he had learned to blend his knowledge and enthusiasm through effective communication.

Perhaps the hallmark of Armand's teaching method was his showmanship. He had demonstrated this trait earlier in his political activities, for example, when he unfurled a petition of 11,000 signatures supporting the Open Beaches bill on the floor of the Texas legislature, stretching it from the speaker's podium to the front door.²³ He found this approach particularly useful with younger people. Appearing regularly on the "Cadet Don" children's television show, he would take with him a spider, a snake, or a model of the solar system to stimulate the young people's enthusiasm. Similarly, his memorable Christmas planetarium shows, his strong interest in photography, and his efforts to persuade the City of Houston to hold ticker tape parades for returning astronauts demonstrated his apprecia-

²⁰Tveten interview; Emanuel interview.

²¹Astronomy, in "Lest We Forget—Armand Yramategui" (scrapbook), Mr. and Mrs. A. V. Emmott Environmental Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; recording of program from "Anything Goes" on October 28, 1968, Armand Bayou Nature Center; *Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1965; *ibid.*, August 27, 1967; *ibid.*, December 26, 1968.

²²Joseph M. Heiser, Jr., conservationist, interview with Sarah Emmott, Houston, Texas, 1980, Armand Bayou Nature Center.

²³Frank Kokesh, Armand Bayou preservationist, interview with Sarah Emmott, January 14, 1980, Armand Bayou Nature Center.

tion for visual and experiential communication.²⁴

The Burke Baker post complemented his already vast aptitudes with the even more limitless subject of space. When Armand and his brother were boys, their father had given them a microscope and a telescope. Starting at a very young age, Armand's view and appreciation of the cosmos naturally ranged from the smallest earthbound creature to the most distant star.²⁵ From his youthful enjoyment of Buck Rogers as his favorite comic strip, he ultimately became an eager proponent of the space effort, describing it as "the greatest thing our nation has ever done" and "a reflection of what the Creator has endowed man with—an infinite intellect for increasing man's understanding of the Creation."²⁶

At this point, as an influential public figure, a man in his forties with a flourishing career and engaged to be married, Armand Yramategui met his tragic and untimely end. As authorities later reconstructed the incident, he was driving out the Southwest Freeway (U.S. Highway 59) on the night of Tuesday, January 27, 1970, in order to view a comet when he had a flat tire near Sharpstown. Discovering his spare was also flat, he began walking to the closest service station. Three young men in a station wagon evidently offered him a lift. When they returned him to his car, they stole what money and equipment he had. Although he offered no resistance to the robbery, one of them shot and killed him. Police later apprehended three suspects upon an informant's advice. While the murder defendant was only 16 years old, a long juvenile offense record qualified him for trial as an adult. He received a 35-year prison sentence. He admitted he really did not know why he had shot Armand.²⁷

This senseless act of violence aroused the city more than many other crimes. Reports of the murder and investigation were headline news for weeks. The prominence of the victim and the callousness of the attack horrified Houstonians. At a time when violence and crime seemed rampant in the United States and when Houston had achieved dubious distinc-

²⁴Aiken interview; *Houston Chronicle*, January 30, 1970; Photography, in "Lest We Forget—Armand Yramategui;" Emmott talk to interpretive guides. As a photographer, Armand captured beautiful vistas of Big Bend, the Padre Island sand dunes, the Big Thicket, and the small box canyons of the Edwards Plateau. Local papers ran a series of his pictures and one even appeared in *Life* magazine.

²⁵Tribute, *Armand Yramategui Memorial Book*, 1980 (scrapbook), Pasadena Public Library.

²⁶*Houston Post*, June 29, 1969.

²⁷*Houston Chronicle*, January 28, 1970; *ibid.*, February 17, 19, 1970; *ibid.*, February 27, 1971. Armand lies buried in the Forest Park cemetery on Lawndale. The impressive red granite family headstone depicts mountains, trees, and birds, to commemorate the family name.

tion as the murder capital of the nation, the national law and order movement strengthened locally and crystallized in this incident. The city initiated regular emergency patrols of the Houston freeways to aid stranded motorists, newspapers ran editorials condemning juvenile crime, and there was public pressure for more police.²⁸

Hundreds of tributes poured in to Armand's mother and brother. Governor Preston Smith, Mayor Louie Welch, Congressmen Bob Eckhardt and George Bush, as well as many others, expressed their sympathies and admiration for Armand. Houston National Bank set up the Armand Yramategui Memorial Fund for the purchase of wilderness land, and there were commemorative nature walks in Memorial Park. The United States Department of the Interior posthumously bestowed a Conservation Service Award, its highest honor for a nonemployee.²⁹

For the people who had known him and worked with him closely, the bereavement was even more profound. They were suddenly impressed with the brevity of life and the need to make available time count for what was most important. Armand himself, who had been deeply troubled by his father's death from cancer and feared a similar fate, in his energetic commitments may have been racing against the same clock. Many decided to redouble their labor on the projects that yielded the greatest satisfaction and rewards. Most dramatically, John Tveten, who had almost accompanied Armand on the fatal night of the shooting, gave up a career as a research chemist to become a free-lance nature photographer and writer. For nature tour director Victor Emanuel and Carl Aiken, later director of the Museum of Natural Science, both of whom had accompanied Armand on his trips to Latin America and who had shaped their career choices largely from Armand's influence, the commitment became deeper. "He was," as Aiken said, "the most genuine person I ever met."³⁰

The continuation of his efforts on behalf of conservation became by far the greatest valediction for Armand. Much as the Kennedy assassination was the catalyst to passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, so the death of this eminent conservationist became an inspiration to others to fulfill his environmental goals. To further one project, the Nature Conservancy, a national environmental group, accepted a bequest from Armand of land he

²⁸*Houston Post*, January 29, 1970; *Houston Chronicle*, January 28, 1970; *ibid.*, February 18, 1970.

²⁹*Houston Chronicle*, January 29, 1970; *ibid.*, April 29, 1970; *ibid.*, October 18, 1970.

³⁰Tveten interview; Emanuel interview; Aiken interview.

had owned in the Big Thicket for preservation as a wilderness area.³¹ In a more poignant gesture, Hana Ginzburg, a member of the Texas Conservation Council and associate with Armand in the effort to defeat the proposed Texas Water Plan, appeared in place of Armand before the Houston City Council and a budget hearing of the Harris County Commissioners to speak on behalf of creating a county parks department, emphasizing the relationship between the lack of open spaces and crime.

At the Commissioners Court hearing, in the first recorded mention of what would eventually become the primary preservationist goal in the Houston area in the early 1970s and the major living commemoration to Armand, Clear Lake resident Frank Kokesh, who had known Armand through the Outdoor Nature Club, spoke directly and prophetically about what was then Middle Bayou, a tributary of Clear Lake. "As for myself," he emphasized, "in the memory of Armand, I will not rest—I will not let you gentlemen rest...until something substantial is done to save the Middle Bayou area, and perhaps someday it will be known as 'Armand's Bayou.'"³²

These brave words came true. Hana Ginzburg, more than anyone else, took up the formidable challenge of converting over 1,600 acres around Middle Bayou from private ownership to the present, publicly owned Armand Bayou Nature Center. The Pasadena City Council in 1970 changed the name of the bayou to commemorate Armand.³³

The impact of his career had been significant, indeed. The circumstances of his life and death had turned him into a patron saint of environmental causes. His many friends, including Terry Hershey, Hana Ginzburg, Army and Sarah Emmott, Carl Aiken, John Tveten, and Victor Emanuel, among others, pursued and continue to pursue professional and volunteer activities on behalf of environmental issues with notable results and inspired to a large degree by his example. More than anything, he had been a great teacher, raising the level of ecological public knowledge in whatever forum he could find, from legislative halls to Boy Scout troops. Others carried on the goal he had first emphasized, so that the ongoing effort to create a cleaner and more balanced urban and natural environment became his greatest legacy.

³¹*Houston Chronicle*, August 8, 1971. That area is now known as Armand's Bog.

³²*Houston Audubon Society Bulletin*, February, 1970; *Houston Post*, January 30, 1970; *Houston Chronicle*, January 30, 1970.

³³For the development of Armand Bayou Nature Center, see James Herzberg, "Preserving Armand Bayou," *The Houston Review* 10 (1988): 105-136.

C. Dav
Texas

The
docum
and it
cattle
who fo
later s
Buffal
south
propo
nient
in the
docu

In
and
pecis
time
tran
the
neig
exp
they
Pas
sche
but

the
int
Wo

au
lib