

A Report of  
Consideration For Converting  
BENTSEN RIO GRANDE VALLEY STATE PARK  
To National Park Status

Prepared By  
Region Three, National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

Report and Investigation  
by  
Milton J. McColm,  
Regional Chief of Land  
and Recreation Planning

## BENTSEN RIO GRANDE VALLEY STATE PARK

### Introduction

By letter of March 18, 1949, the Honorable Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr., House of Representatives, made a request to the Director of the National Park Service to give consideration to the conversion of Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park, Texas, to National Park status.

Congressman Bentsen had previously discussed his proposal with Mr. C. L. Wirth of the Director's staff.

In the Director's answer of March 30, 1949, to Congressman Bentsen's letter of March 18, 1949, he stated that he was asking Regional Director M. R. Tillotson at Santa Fe, New Mexico, to have an investigation made of the Park at the first opportunity.

On April 6, 1949, Regional Director Tillotson advised the Director that the requested investigation and report would be made soon or at least prior to June 30, 1949, and that Mr. Gordon K. Shearer, Executive Secretary of the Texas State Parks Board, would be advised and consulted in respect to the investigation and report.

Subsequent thereto, arrangements were made to meet Mr. Shearer at Austin, Texas, and for him to accompany me on the investigation of the Park.

On Monday, May 9, I flew to Austin and met with and discussed the Park and the investigation with Mr. Shearer and Mr. Norfleet G. Bone, Architect of Mr. Shearer's staff. Mr. Bone had collected and assembled material on the Park, which has been of considerable value in the investigation and this report. The discussion, likewise, gave me additional information.

The following morning, Mr. Shearer and I left Austin with transportation furnished by Mr. Shearer for Mission, Texas. On entering the Valley some miles north of Edenburg, Texas, we encountered a light rain. We arrived at Mission Texas, shortly after 6:00 P. M.

The next morning it was raining hard and continued so while we were in the Park. Because of this rain, it was impossible for us to see any of the Park except that immediately adjacent to Manager George H. Harper's park residence.



Mr. Harper stated that if the rain would stop and the sun would come out good for a day or two, we could then get over the roads in the Park. It was evident that the rain would continue for some time. Mr. Harper had received a weather report over the radio that it was likely to continue for thirty-six hours. Therefore, only preliminary data, comments, and discussions with persons acquainted with the characteristics, features, use and development of the Park were accomplished at that time.

I had previously been into this park area in 1945 during my first trip on investigation of the recreational aspects of the Valley Gravity Project--Mission Reservoir.

On June 22, 1949, I again visited the Park and in the company of Park Manager Harper and Mr. E. H. Dulse of the Bureau of Reclamation, was able to make a more complete and comprehensive investigation of the area.

#### Location of the Area

The Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park abuts upon the Rio Grande. The entrance to the park is approximately four air line miles southwest of Mission, Hidalgo County, Texas.

The most dependable access road to the Park is by hard surface road running south out of Mission about three miles to the military telegraph road thence northwesterly on the gravel surface military road for about three more miles to the Park entrance. (See Location and Access Map)

#### Topography

The topography of the area is typical of river bottom adjacent to constantly shifting river channel and subject to overflow during flood periods of the river.

Elevation generally throughout the park ranges between 110 and 115 feet MSL, with a very small area near the entrance and immediately surrounding the Park Manager's residence at 120 feet in elevation. At normal river flow, the sand banks are approximately 20 feet above the water.

#### Climate

The climate in the valley in which the Park is located is semi-tropical and semi-arid. The mean annual temperature at Brownsville, approximately 50 miles to the southeast is 73°, with a variation between January and July of approximately twelve degrees at Brownsville and a slightly greater variation at Mission near the Park.

The average annual precipitation at Mission is 21 inches. There are two periods of heaviest rainfall, May-June and September-October, with much of this occurring as heavy down-pours; a rainfall of 5 inches in 24 hours is not uncommon. Protracted droughts are also common.

The average frost free growing season at Mission is reported to be 310 days.

The prevailing wind during most of the year is from the southeast. During the winter, cold winds occasionally come from the north. Although the Lower Rio Grande Valley is subject to tropical hurricanes originating in the Gulf of Mexico, only two have crossed the Valley in recent years. These occurred August 4 and September 4 and 5, in 1933.

### Scenic Features

Only the resacas and the view which one can get by looking across and upon and down the Rio Grande can be classed as scenic features. None of these are so outstanding as to draw visitors to the area for them alone.

### Geology

The only geology which might be of interest to some visitors is the opportunity to intimately observe the effects of channel changes by the frequent meandering of the Rio Grande. A plugged oil well of about 8,000 feet in depth is in the Park.

### Wildlife

From Mr. George H. Harper, Park Manager, and a report of the Fish and Wildlife Service, it was learned that the area is a veritable paradise for birds. This was apparent during the investigation.

In the Fish and Wildlife section of the Bureau of Reclamation Project Report No. 5-0619-3, "Plan for Development, Valley Gravity Project, Rio Grande (lower) Basin", there is the following in reference to non-game insectivorous and song birds in the Valley:

"This region is especially noted for its wide variety of common birds. A list of these would be very extensive, including most passerines. Interesting and rare species include the following: Audubon's oriole, hooded oriole, zone-tailed hawk, Merrill's partridge, groove-billed ani, Sennett's thrasher, green jay, derby fly catcher, and red-eyed cowbird."



Of upland game, the same report states:

"Upland game values in the project area are high. The eastern white-winged dove is abundant and is the most important... due to its extreme popularity with the hunter. Mourning dove are very abundant.. The red-billed pigeon, white-fronted dove and chachalacas (Mexican game cocks) are found in numbers. Texas bobwhite quail are fairly abundant, especially in the irrigated areas. Scaled quail are scarce, being found only in areas not under cultivation. Cottontail rabbits are relatively scarce."

The mammal life in the Park area is not important or particularly noticeable.

#### Vegetation

The dense tree, shrub and plant growth which covers a major portion of the Park is one of the few large remaining, dense stands of semi-tropical plant materials native to the river bottom land in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

No attempt has, thus far, been made to catalogue the many varieties of trees, shrubs and flowers in the Park, but from observation, comments received, and a review of a report on "Plants of Ornamental Value Native to the Lower Rio Grande Valley", prepared by the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, A. & M. College of Texas, July 22, 1940, such a catalogue would list a considerable number of species.

Among the trees and shrubs most commonly known are mesquite, ebony (Texas), hackberry, mimosa, huisache, horse bean, cateclaw, ash, elm, guayacan and holly.

It was Mr. Harper's opinion that the many berry producing trees and shrubs encouraged the bird population in the Park.

#### Attitude of Local People and Organisations

The Texas State Parks Board apparently desires to retain the Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park in the State Park system and is anxious to provide the required development in the area. To date, the Board has not been able to get the necessary funds from the Legislature for such development and does not see the possibility of such funds forthcoming in the near future.

The officials of Hidalgo County have been quite cooperative by giving the Park Manager some assistance in the limited maintenance and repair to roads within the Park.

There is no general and concerted manifestation of local interest in the park. Few individuals strongly expressed the need for such public park and recreational areas in the Valley and the need for development of this one.

#### Related Population

The Valley counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy had a combined population in 1940 of 215,803. The growth of population in those counties has been as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Increase</u>
1890	20,958	
1900	22,932	1,974
1910	40,886	17,954
1920	85,861	44,975
1930	176,452	90,591
1940	215,803	39,351

Hidalgo County had in 1940 a population of 106,959. According to the 1930 census, the percentages of Latin-Americans in the Counties were as follows:

<u>County</u>	<u>Per cent Latin-American Population</u>
Cameron	40-50
Hidalgo	50-60
Starr	over 70
Willacy	50-60

The negro population in these counties is small, with up to one per cent in Starr, Hidalgo, and Willacy and from one to five per cent in Cameron County.

Most of this Latin-American population is the source of common and agricultural labor in the Valley.

#### Recreational Use and Possibilities

The park offers opportunities for day-use activities such as picnicking, nature study, boating, fishing, and swimming and some camping. The present development of unimproved roads and a few picnic areas with some tables, benches, and fire-places is all that is available for use.

The number of visitors to the Park as supplied by the Texas State Parks Board are: 1947 - March through August - 3,417, and 1948 - for the year - 38,511.

Park Manager, George H. Harper, supplied the following figures for 1949.



<u>Month</u>	<u>Teams</u>	<u>Out-of State</u>	<u>Campers</u>	<u>Day Visitors</u>	<u>Total</u>
January	332	266	360	2043	2403
February	345	299	216	2037	2253
March	555	300	150	3310	3460
April	Est.	Est.	148	6214	6362

These figures for 1949 show a large percentage of out-of-state visitors for January, February, and March. From discussion with Mr. Harper, it was obvious that a good portion of the campers were from out of the state; however, local fishermen account for a larger per cent of the camping.

The winter months are the popular months for tourists and out-of-state people to visit the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The climate during those months is very inviting.

The large attendance for the month of April is accounted for primarily by the large groups of Latin-Americans picnicking on Easter, which to most of them is an annual occasion to celebrate. Mr. Harper estimated that about 75% of the visitors on Easter were from that group. He showed me a site where about 1,500 of this group picnicked at that time. He also stated that about an equally large percentage of visitors during the summer months were from that group.

This is not due alone from the large percentage of Latin-Americans in the four counties but also because there are but few, if any other, public parks or recreational areas available in the Valley to this population group.

In fact, this park area seems to be the only public area available to all of the population in the Valley for recreational purposes, other than along the Gulf Coast. Most of the park and recreational areas within the Valley are privately owned, developed and operated.

#### Relationship to Other Park Areas

This park is so remote from other State parks and any National Park that no relationship thereto is considered. It is over 100 miles from the nearest State park; namely, Lake Corpus Christi.

There are some Cameron County owned lands on the islands near the mouth of the Rio Grande which are available to the public for beach type recreation.

The Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, located on the river about seven and one-half miles south of the city of Alamo, is an area like the State Park. It has been set aside by the Fish and Wildlife Service as an outstanding habitat of semi-tropical vegetation in which many birds rare in the

United States, such as the Chackalacas and others are found, and found only in that part of Texas.

The area was authorized by the Migratory Bird Commission on January 27, 1942. On September 1, 1943, it was deeded to the Federal Government. It was established under Dr. Ira Gabrielson who, it is understood, rates it as one of the outstanding refuges of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The refuge contains 1980.50 acres of this outstanding semi-tropical habitat. During my June 22 visit to the Valley, Mr. Duke and I visited this refuge. It is obvious even to one untrained and inexperienced in biology, botany, or bird life that the refuge is superior and more outstanding in such values than the State Park. The vegetation appears more healthy there than in the Park. There is no grazing in the refuge and the roads or vehicle trails are of such alignment and character that no dust is created by travel over them.

The effects of the grazing and dust in the Park is as obvious as the effects of their lacking is in the refuge.

In contacting the Region Two Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service at Albuquerque, in which Region the refuge is located, the following was learned:

That Service is anxious to keep the refuge like it is, and their plans for development emphasize preservation and protection. If there is sufficient demand, provision for limited day-use, such as picnicking, may be developed.

This may also include some provision for short period camping of youth groups and persons with scientific interest on permit and reservation basis. Other camping would be discouraged or even prohibited.

Roads and foot trails would be kept primitive as they are now.

#### Facilities Required for Development

Since such a great portion of the Park is subject to overflow during flood stages of the Rio Grande, only limited development can be justified.

It seems that this overflow is essential to some of the plant growth; however, without it, if sufficient rainfall is available the plants would not suffer.



Mr. Harper reported that prior to his management of the Park from about two and a half years ago, there was about a five-year period of dry years and no overflows, during which time much of the vegetation suffered. He stated that in the past twelve months the Park has been overflowed four times, the first since 1932. When the Falcon Dam is completed, it is expected that the frequency of these overflows will be reduced.

#### Roads

The main loop road in the Park is sufficient in width and of fairly good alignment. There are ~~some~~ too long tangents which encourage sufficient speed to create much dust during dry periods. This road needs fills in low places, drainage structures, and a dust free surface. There seems to be too many secondary roads. A detailed planning study might possibly eliminate some of these. It is believed that these secondary roads need be no more than of trail type and certainly of slow speed in character. If kept to that standard and located to avoid low spots, it might not be necessary to use any surfacing material on them.

#### Picnic and Camping Areas

More complete, general and group-type picnic and camping areas should be provided particularly in close proximity to the lakes or resacas in the Park.

#### Water and Sanitary Facilities

Potable water should be supplied to the picnic and camping areas. This, it is understood, can be accomplished either by a gravity water line from the water supply at the manager's house or by a well or wells near the developed areas.

It seems that pit toilets will be satisfactory for sanitary facilities in the picnic and camping areas.

All of these facilities should be designed and constructed to withstand the overflows with as little damage as it is possible.

#### Management and Utility Area

An additional residence and utility building for equipment and materials seem necessary in this area.

#### Overnight Accommodations

Facilities for meals, lunches, and overnight accommodations do not appear to be needed in the present Park area.

### Land Status

The land status map included in this report clearly shows lands now owned by the State and within the Park and other lands available for addition to the Park. The land shown as addition by accretions (approximately 300 acres) is considered as being owned by the State.

That shown as State Park Property was donated by the Bentsen Brothers. The Kings Dance tract owned by the Bentsen Brothers is available for an addition to the Park.

The private property owned by Mr. Boyd is apparently not available for addition to the Park.

### Summary of Findings

1. Only the biological values of the Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park could possibly be considered as of national significance. These values are primarily the plant and bird life contained therein.

However, these same values, in an apparent better quality and on a larger area, are contained in the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge which was established a little over seven years ago. Therefore, there already exists in the Valley, within approximately 25 miles of the park, an area under Federal jurisdiction administered by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the preservation and protection of such biological values. The Park could be of only secondary value and significance to the refuge.

2. Aside from the biological values, the State Park area has no interest or feature of national significance,

3. Analysis of visitation at the Park definitely indicates that it is primarily of only local interest and appeal. Even though records show many visitors to the Park from out-of-the-Valley and out-of-the-State, it is the Valley and the winter climate therein which attracts those visitors and not the Park.

4. There is a lack of public areas for park and recreational purposes in the Valley. Such areas are definitely needed, and the Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park should remain as a State Park to help satisfy that need.

5. Additional and improved development is needed in the Park to properly accommodate visitors.



6. The value of the Park for public recreational use can be greatly enhanced by combining the Park and its development with that of proposed Mission Reservoir.

The proposed reservoir will cover approximately 60 acres or more of the Park land. With the addition of some land acquired for reservoir purposes, it seems possible to have about one-half mile of Park frontage upon the reservoir. Such shore frontage would add greatly to the recreational opportunities and value of the Park.

It seems possible in the approval and authorization of the reservoir of the Valley Gravity Project, that an agreement could be authorized whereby the Bureau of Reclamation could provide the development needed in the Park and on the shore of the reservoir in exchange for the State land required for reservoir purposes.

#### Recommendation

It is specifically recommended that the Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park not be considered for national park or monument status.

It is recommended that the Park be tied into and made a part of the recreational development which is possible along the south shore of the proposed Mission Reservoir and that the administration thereof remain as a State Park with the Texas State Parks Board.

#### Acknowledgments

##### Texas State Parks Board

Base map of park area, aerial photographs and other data.

##### Bureau of Reclamation -- Valley Gravity Project Office

Base map for location map, small photographs in park and transportation, June 21 and 22.

##### U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- Region Two Office

Data on Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

##### John J. Mosley -- Region Three, National Park Service Cover and maps.

Milton J. McCalm  
Regional Chief of Land  
and Recreational Planning

Date of Report:  
June, 1949

## **Harpers Ferry Center**

### **SEPARATION SHEET**

<b>Description of Material</b>  Photographs: Rio Grande Valley State Park, 1949
<b>Collection Name</b>  Proposed Areas
<b>Record Series</b>  Series III: Park Planning, Facilities, and Lands Records, Subseries E: Proposed Areas
<b>Original Location</b>  Folder Title: Individual Proposals: Intermountain – TX – Bentsen – Rio Grande Valley State Park, 1949 Box # 2 Folder # 6
<b>New Location</b>  HFCA Willow Springs, Rm 129 Proposed Areas Box 15 (Binder Box)
<b>Separated by:</b> Lloyd S. Williams  <b>Date:</b> 2/20/2015





Entrance to Park



Caretaker's house  
in northwest por-  
tion of Park

Taken from water tower at  
caretaker's house looking  
southeast over Park





Trail leading to  
a picnic area



One of several picnic  
areas within the Park

Section of road  
within picnic area



Photographs by Bureau of Reclamation, Valley Gravity Project





Resaca or lake on  
west boundary of  
park looking  
northeast



Taken from same  
place as above  
photograph but  
looking southwest

Another picnic  
area near lake



Photographs by Bureau of Reclamation, Valley Gravity Project

Large ebony  
tree in Park



Rio Grande along south  
border of Park looking  
downstream or southeast



Same as above looking  
upstream or northwest

Photographs by Bureau of Reclamation, Valley Gravity Project



Views along Park's secondary  
roads showing moss growth on trees



Another view of  
secondary road  
within Park...  
Rio Grande in  
background

Photographs by Milton J. McColm

Views along main loop  
road showing size and char-  
acter of vegetative cover



Bank along Rio Grande  
showing height at  
normal water level

Photographs by Milton J. McColm



Aerial View of Park Looking to the  
East with Rio Grande in Lower Right Corner

Photographs Courtesy Texas State Parks Board

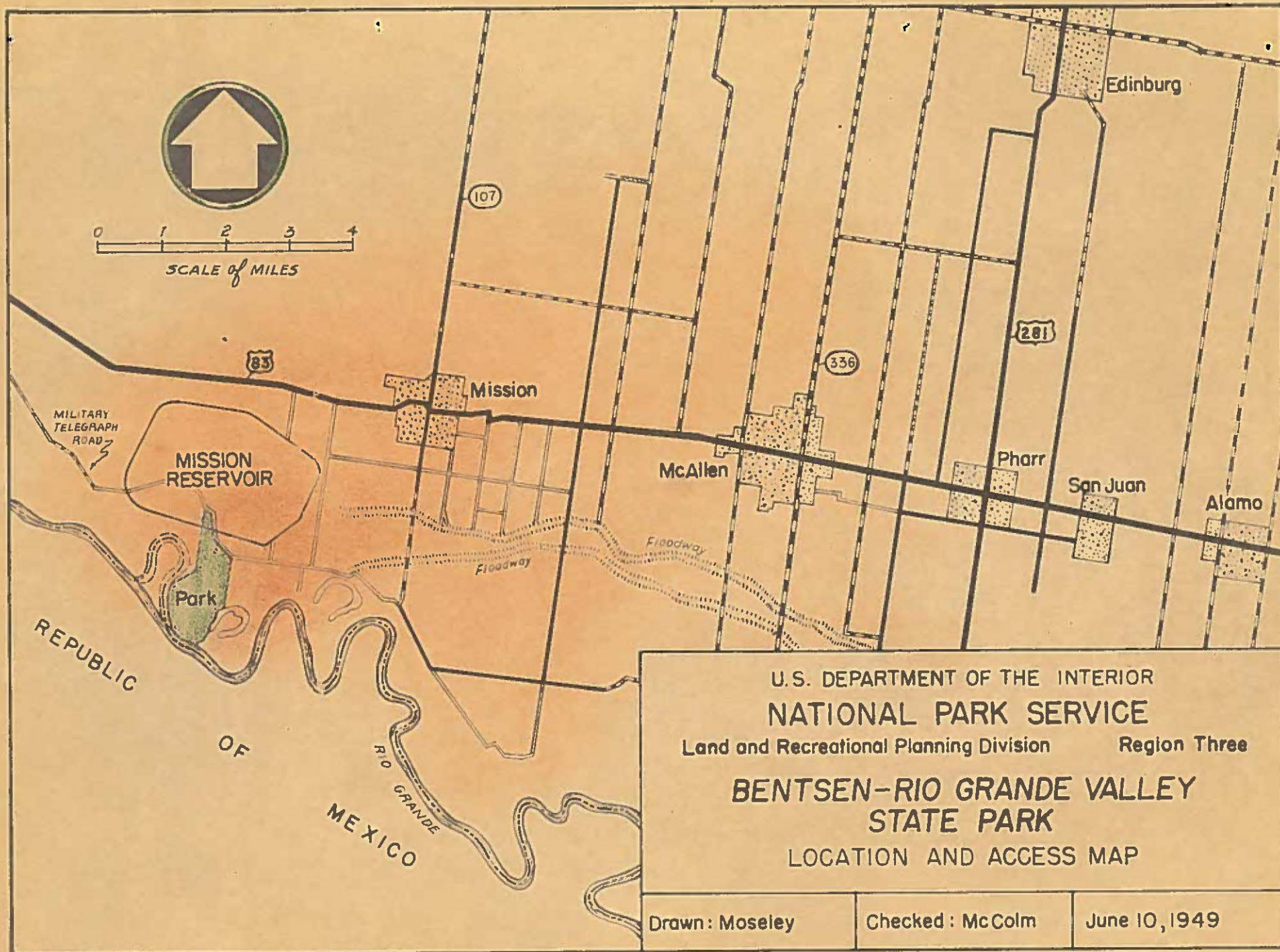
**Aerial View of Park Showing Dense Tree and Shrub Growth**

**Photographs Courtesy Texas State Parks Board**

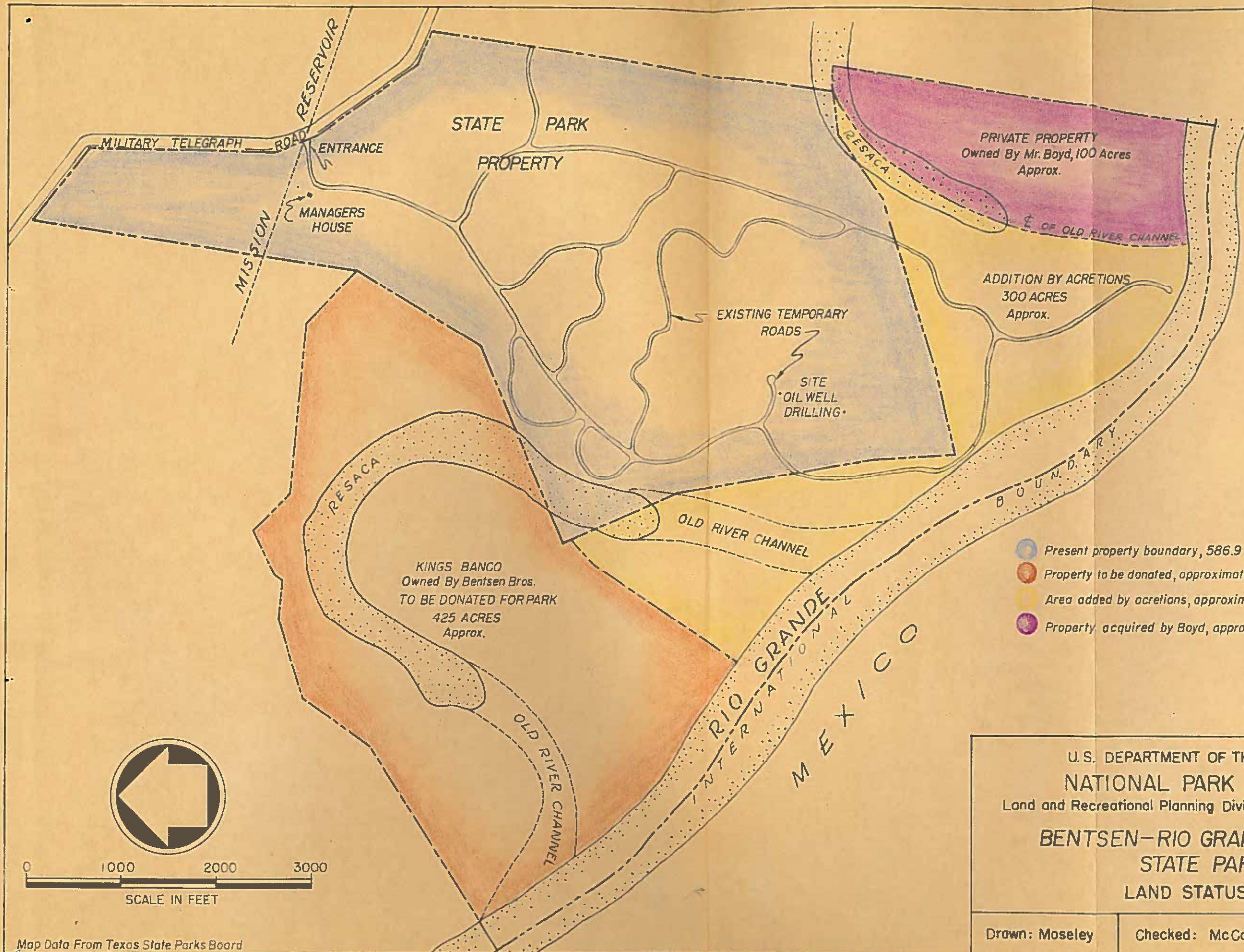


View From Air Looking up Rio Grande or Northwest

Photographs Courtesy Texas State Parks Board







- Present property boundary, 586.9 Acres
- Property to be donated, approximately 425 Acres
- Area added by accretions, approximately 300 Acres
- Property acquired by Boyd, approximately 100 Acres

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Land and Recreational Planning Division Region Three  
BENTSEN-RIO GRANDE VALLEY  
STATE PARK  
LAND STATUS MAP

Drawn: Moseley

Checked: McColm

June 14, 1949