

# Three friends essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Austin Inspiration I will be the first to admit that in all of my years of swimming at Barton Springs, I never took a good look at Philosopher's Rock until recently. I've absentmindedly passed by the statue more times than I can count on my fingers and toes, not once stopping to read the inscription on the stones around it.

The sculpture has always been at the entrance of the pool, a constant during visits with my family when I was younger, with hometown friends during college visits years ago, and with several of my friends and roommates in the recent summer months. I always assumed that the men portrayed by the statue were old Austin blue hairs who donated millions to Zilker Park. They were men who didn't really hold any relevance to the springs, men without names and faces. I was sure.

I could not have been more wrong. The men depicted in Philosopher's Rock, J. Frank Dobie, Roy Bedichek, and Walter Prescott Webb, have everything to do with Barton Springs and everything we call Austin, as I found out on my last visit. Under an archway of trees, Philosopher's Rock sits surrounded by random chunks of stone, some flat and some jagged, all four or five paces from the statue itself. A rowdy group of pre-pubescent boys find the rocks to be a perfect place for a game of tag, running and leaping from rock to rock and completely oblivious to my quiet study on a flat slab nearby. The faces of Dobie, Webb, and Bedichek look disgruntled from far away, especially with 13-year-old boys swinging on their arms and using their feet as footholds and launching pads.

The game is eventually called off in favor of snow cones from a stand in the park, and the bronze faces of the three friends relax in the summer sun. The friends are stationed on and around a large rock meant to represent a famous one of limestone inside Barton Springs, known back in the day as “Conversation Rock” or “Bedi’s Rock”, where Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb often met to talk and enjoy the natural beauty of Austin. Dobie and Bedichek sit on the edge of the rock. Dobie is crossed-legged and rests his left hand behind himself, while Bedichek twists to his left to face the others, his feet dangling off the rock over imaginary water. Webb stands on the right side of the rock, his slacks rolled up above his ankles and his shirtsleeves pushed past his wrists.

Webb wasn’t a swimmer, as the sculpture’s main stone states, and this is perfectly portrayed as he stands fully clothed (save shoes and socks) and slightly separated from the other two, shirtless and in their swimwear. While detached from Dobie and Bedichek physically, Webb’s body language suggests quite the opposite of his involvement in their conversation. Webb leans in toward the rock, his mouth open in mid-sentence and his feet crossed at the ankles. His hands cross each other as well, his left palm facing up and his right perpendicular to its partner, cigarette scissored between two fingers.

Webb’s pose is the strongest of the three; his eyes steady, baldhead gleaming in the sunlight, his lips cracking a small smile. Dobie sits casually to Webb’s left, nearly balancing his arm on his knee, stretching his hand toward Bedichek on his right. His eyes are relaxed and Dobie smiles with his

mouth open, top teeth showing. He glances in Bedichek's direction, as if in silent humor of what Webb is delegating to them.

Bedichek faces both of them, smiling, his thick-rimmed glasses secure on his face. He balances a book in his right hand, a Latin inscription on the open page. Etched in an uneven scrawl, the page reads, "Amicitia non potest esse nisi in bonis", meaning "Friendship isn't able to exist except among good people". The phrase in Bedichek's book not only captures the idea of the statue, but the spirit of the springs that the three friends were so fond of. While the statue was created to celebrate the lives of Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb, Philosopher's Rock also captures the relationship between Austin and its very unique environment.

Everyday, hundreds of Austinites, tourists, and Texans alike visit Zilker Park to enjoy Barton Springs. Families and friends swim in the pool's chilly water and soak up sun on the long, sloping lawns leading down to the spring. People from around the state come together, just as the three friends did, to enjoy nature just footsteps away from a busy urban setting. The statue mixes the intellectual thought and friendship of the folklorist, naturalist, and historian with Austin's appreciation of nature, proving that man and nature, in the extreme, can exist side by side. Austin's mix of forward thought and appreciation of wildlife makes it a special city, actively working to get ahead intellectually and naturally. Philosopher's Rock symbolizes this cooperation and friendship between man and man and man and nature at Barton Springs and throughout Austin.

Bedichek demonstrated this understanding in not only his love for wildlife, but in his literary works late in his life. Born June 27, 1878 in Cass County, Illinois, Bedichek moved to Falls County, Texas with his family when he was 6 years old. He attended rural schools during his early childhood and also the Bedichek Academy that was founded by his father, James Madison Bedichek. When he was 19, Bedichek enrolled in The University of Texas at Austin and earned his Bachelors Degree in 1903.

After receiving his degree, Bedichek went on to work as a reporter in Fort Worth, Texas and eventually an editor for The San Antonio Express. His work as a journalist and affinity for rich detail is evident in his later works, such as *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist* (1947), as seen in his incredible description of the native plants and animals of Texas. After playing the role of reporter, Bedichek worked as a high school teacher across the state, teaching in Houston and later in San Angelo, Texas. In 1917, Bedichek began working for the University Interscholastic League (UIL), an organization used to promote academic and athletic activities at the high school level. In 1925, Bedichek started his term as Director of the UIL and began visiting schools across the state.

In more remote areas of the state, lodging was not always available, so Bedichek took to nature and camped out. He developed a passion for wildlife, especially birds. Bedichek's passion for nature is evident in his writing, especially in *Adventures*, published just before his retirement from the UIL in 1948. Bedichek lived what he was writing about, and his experience with and love of nature is clear in his writings. He went on to write three more books, the fourth and final being published after his sudden

death in 1959. In the decades before his retirement, Bedichek made the trip to Zilker Park every day to swim at Barton Springs.

There, he would meet up with his friends Dobie and Webb to sit on the limestone slabs surrounding the spring and take dips in the cool water, the three Austin celebrities of their time. Although all three friends have long since passed away, their friendship and love of Barton Springs lives on every single day as they watch over the entryway to the pool. As I turned away from the scene and began the walk back to my car, I took one last look at Philosopher's Rock as I checked over my notes. The sun reflected on each of the three faces, still grinning in mid conversation.

I noticed a soft slope and ledge at the front of the sculpture, an open space around the rock. The openness of the spot struck me. Why was it there? Maybe the artist didn't want to clutter the sculpture. Maybe she carefully designed the spot to be the perfect foothold for scaling the statue (as I had seen earlier during the game of tag). Or maybe the empty space was meant to be a seat for someone else, an invitation to all who passed to sit and enjoy the beauty of the springs and the friendships of those around them like Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb did throughout their lives.