

HILL'S MOUNTAIN

Ellis W. Shuler

Dust to dust! To have his ashes scattered over Round Mountain nearby his boyhood home, Comanche, Texas, was the old man's wish and will.

As I climbed the steep slope of this mountain, an increasing, breath-taking landscape unrolled beneath my view, and I began to understand. This was Hill's delectable mountain. It was from this mountain that he saw his celestial city. Here there was a burning bush and a voice.

There was an exaltation in standing up on this mountain. Down below, the flat prairie ran on and into the rising sun. Its broad floor shimmered prevailingly gray, but here and there a patch of green. Cattle in the distance were toys. The giant live oaks hugging the base of the mountain, up through which I had climbed, were now bushes and the thin mesquite spreading outward and beyond on the prairie but garden truck. To the right and back around the compass there was hush and stillness and a brooding mystery, something unknown, and, above all, elusive to the senses.

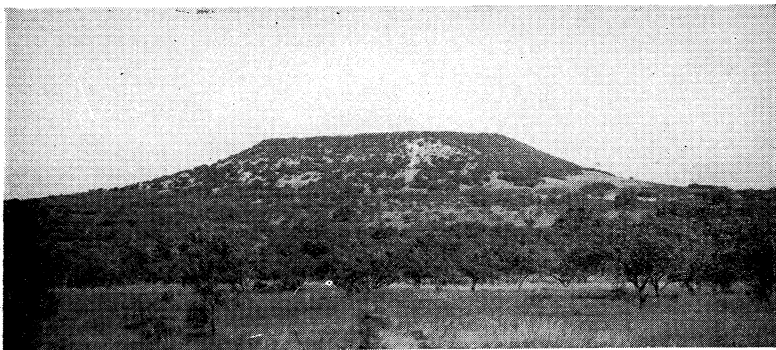
There was magic here! And that can be easily proven because this scene transformed a printer boy into the making of a great scientist!

The climb is steep. Near the top I sat down on a ledge of rock to comprehend the view. Then I looked more closely at the ledge. It was a mass of shells.

Robert T. Hill was often a lonesome boy; but he loved being alone, for it gave him more time for his own thoughts and questions. There was in him, even as a boy, that divine spark of curiosity and imagination which makes for immortality.

Perhaps, I thought, he sat at this very spot and saw here his first fossils. No, not his first, for as a small boy he remembered pounding a coral head with a linchpin lost from a

cannon rolling through the streets of Nashville in 1864. That was but a precocious memory. Here on this mountain he had first begun to wonder. What were these shells; and more importantly, from whence did they come? Why did this mountain stand so high above the prairie?



Round Mountain, Comanche, Texas. (Photograph courtesy George G. Smith)

It would be interesting to know what answers this boy thought out for these questions on his repeated visits to the mountain; all that we know is that they did not satisfy him, for he must needs send for a textbook of geology to ease his eager mind. But even this did not satisfy him, for he found numerous fossils here that were not in the textbook. It was long years after, when he had studied the rocks of many parts of Texas, that he was able to read the whole story of his mountain. And what a story!

Again in maturity, as did the boy, Hill saw from the mountain top the shining prairies, but he also saw in his imagination an ancient land in this area sink beneath encroaching seas to become buried under layers of sands from a great engulfing beach; he saw waves and currents, ocean waters, spread over the sands a great sheet of layered muds. Then the sea becomes clear and shell life in incredible numbers spreads over its floor. A reef of oysters bottoms it; and what a comfortable ledge seat they make on the mountain slope. Then more clay muds; and now are deposited

thick beds of lime-muds filled with shells. How fine a cap they make for Hill's Mountain!

The complete story of the sediments laid down here cannot be told briefly. The downward earth warp and sediment filling continued long after the date of the beds which now form Hill's Mountain. But it was he who first recognized them in this mountain as part of an older sequence of Cretaceous rocks and properly named them, after his home town, the Comanchean Series.

Yet one part of the story must be continued, for it is prairie not ocean waves which can be seen today from the top of Hill's Mountain. Slowly the sea bottom rises and the great overlying chalk series of rock beds and the Comanchean Series beneath it are lifted high above the ocean waves and Central Texas is arched up in a broad dome.

Forces of the air and rainfall now take charge. Ancestral Colorado and Brazos rivers begin to cut and carry away these uplifted beds. Great sheets of sedimentary rock are stripped off by these streams to be laid down in new sheets along the Gulf's marginal seas. This broad earth arch, scalped and carved by the rivers, finally becomes the land which Hill so strikingly describes with the word so often used by his warm friend Powell, the "Central Denuded Area" of Texas.

The prairie floor has been denuded of its overlying beds. Round Mountain, Hill's Mountain, is a fortuitous remnant left standing which so far has escaped that great denudation.

Dust to dust? Where a finer resting place than with the dust of the ages; but there is something here not of the dust, a spark, a voice, a spirit; something here which understands the mill that grinds it! Something fortuitous? No!