

Banana leaves, bamboo sticks, twisted vines and a bit of wind. Three thousand years ago, that's all it took to create a "great arm" that reached up into the skies, connecting humanity with the heavens — a fascinating phenomenon. Fast-forward to 1999. Leaves and bamboo have been replaced with fiberglass, graphite rods, carbon and other high-tech materials, but when all is said and done and the wind is up, we've still got this great arm reaching into the skies, connecting us with the heavens.

The 71st Annual Zilker Park Kite Festival, sponsored by the Exchange Club of Austin and the Parks and Recreation Department, takes place Sunday. The longest-running kite contest in the United States, Austin's first sky party took place March 10, 1929, at Lamar Park, just west of the Congress Avenue bridge. The festival moved to Zilker in 1936.

Bunnie Twidwell, member of the Exchange Club and co-chair of this year's event, views the gathering as more of a festival than a competition.

Zilker Park Kite Festival
When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday
Where: Zilker Park soccer field
How much: Free
Info: 647-7488

"It's a fun event with no burdens," she said. "There's nothing negative about it. The kites are beautiful and artistic and they hurt no one." Twidwell, who has been attending the tournaments since she was 8 years old, says the Austin festival commands national respect. Past events have seen turnouts of anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 people.

"Our festival is unique," Twidwell said. "Lots of other festivals are centered around sports kites with dual lines and stunts. Ours is open to the public and free of charge."

The festival also encourages kids to get in on the flying, and volunteers have provided time and materials to help children prepare their own kites.

Kite-making workshops at area recreation centers drew expert volunteers like Richard Robertson, ex-member of the American Fliers Association.

"Back when I was a kid, all kites were based on a 26-inch frame," said the 71-year-old kitemaker. "Orange crates were 26 inches; that's what we used to make

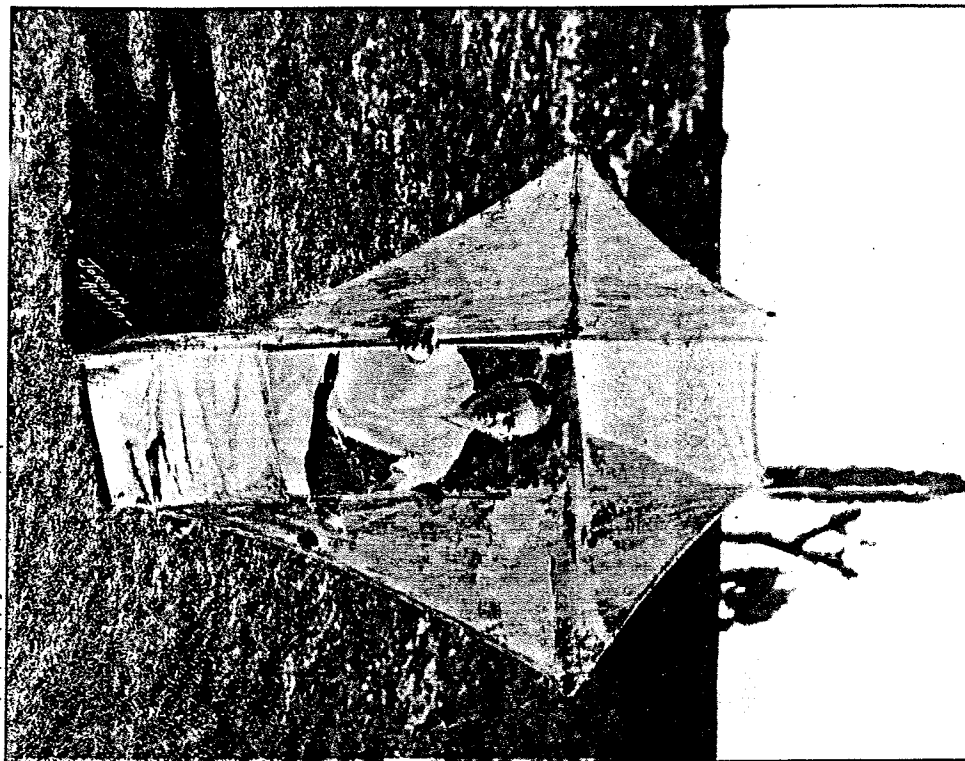


photo courtesy of richard robertson

Winfred Gustafson was a winner in the first kite tournament in 1929 at Lamar Park, just west of the Congress Avenue bridge.

Four steps to weekend kite-jockey nirvana at Zilker!