

The Greatest Conservation Story You Never Heard: 75 Years of Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration

Imagine a nationwide coalition saying "please tax us; we want to pay federal taxes." Such a thing seems inconceivable today, but that's essentially what happened starting 75 years ago when hunters and anglers called for what became the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) programs.

They were motivated by dire peril. By the late 1800s, America was on a runaway train barreling toward a natural resource disaster—and most people didn't even know it. While we were busy creating the richest and most powerful nation in the world, we were also laying waste to its natural abundance.

By the late 1800s, vast herds of 100 million bison and 40 million pronghorn antelope pounding across the American plains had vanished. An estimated 60 million beaver had been reduced to 100,000. Up to 40 million passenger pigeons, so dense in numbers it took hours for them to pass overhead, had disappeared. Waterfowl populations had plummeted. Swamps had been drained, prime habitat converted to agriculture, and market hunting continued unabated. Women wore hats festooned with feathers of 40 varieties of native birds, and would eventually wear the entire bodies of birds on their heads. We were plucking America bare.

The story was similar in

Texas, where deer, turkey and other game animals had declined to near extirpation by the turn of the century. For example, in 1911, the greater prairie chicken of the Blackland Prairie was last observed. By 1960, desert bighorn sheep had disappeared from western mountaintops.

Yet by the early 1900s, a handful of conservation-minded free-thinkers emerged with the political will to save America's natural treasures. They were, by and large, America's hunters

and anglers. In the first half of the 20th century, near total responsibility for natural resource conservation fell on their shoulders. That's because state hunting and fishing license revenue provided the one stable funding source to protect, restore, and manage fish and wildlife resources.

But it was not enough. Underfunded, understaffed, and prone to political interference, fledgling wildlife agencies in Texas and other states more often than not confronted frustration and



Jim Brown of San Angelo reeled in this nice 6.45 pound Big Mouth Bass from Oak Creek Lake on May 17, 2012.

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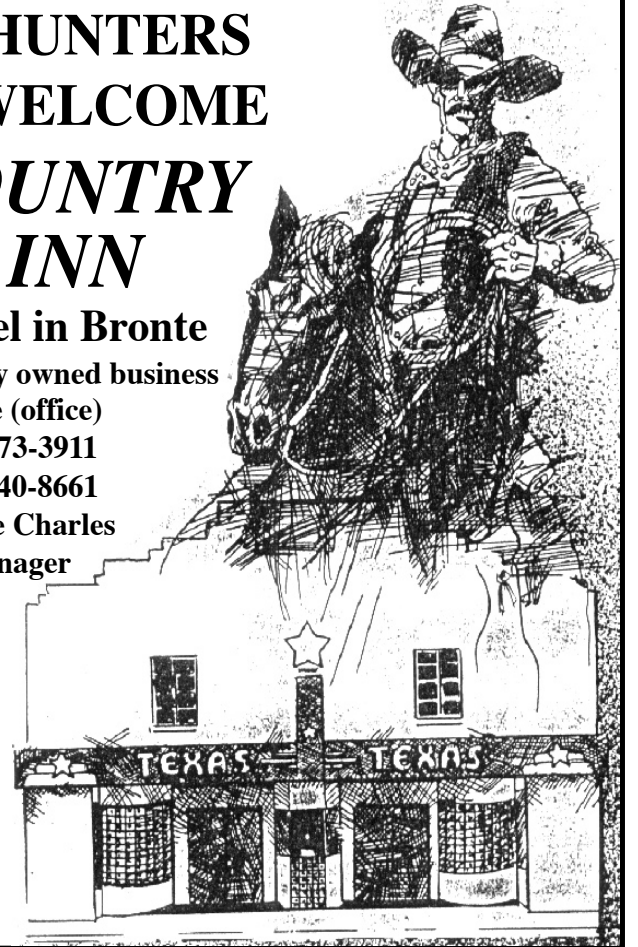
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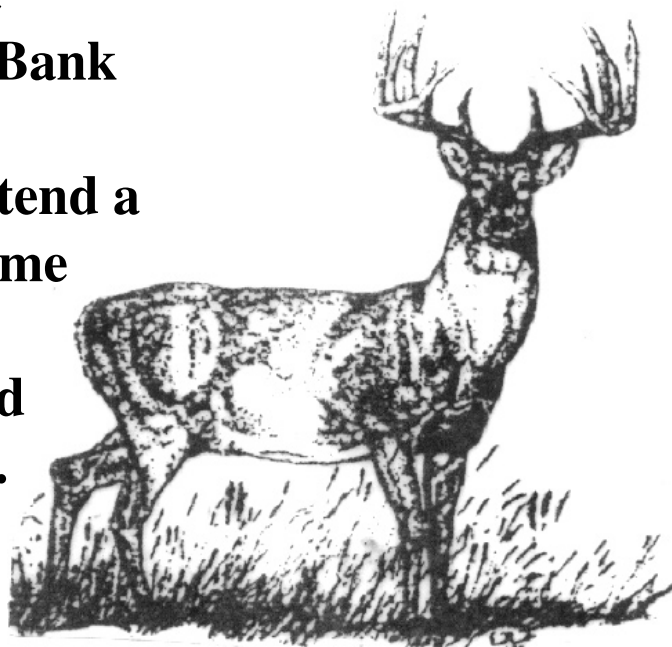
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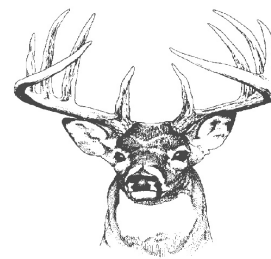
FNB First National Bank Bronte, Texas

We, at the
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hearty welcome
to all the
hunters and
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