

Big Thicket Reporter - #104

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BIG THICKET WARRIOR DIES

Brandt Mannchen, February 12, 2010



Former U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson died on February 10, 2010 from a heart condition. Although affectionately known as “Timber Charlie,” and primarily known by the media for his actions on behalf of Afghanistan, without his help there would be no Big Thicket National Preserve or wilderness in East Texas.

Charlie Wilson was called “Timber Charlie” because he used to work for Temple-Inland the iconic East Texas lumber company in Diboll, Texas. Although Charlie did agree with many aspects of the timber business he did not like “clear-cutting” and chastised and cajoled the timber industry in his district to do a better job logging. He was clear to the U.S. Forest Service that they should reduce “clear-cutting” in National Forests in Texas and eventually they did.

Charlie was a U.S. Congressman from 1973 to 1996 and during that time period was the final arbiter for legislation that created the Big Thicket National Preserve. As a way to stay in sync with his district he removed Village Creek from the 1974 Big Thicket National Preserve legislation. This was an action that conservationists opposed and that he later regretted. He then introduced a bill in the 1986 to reverse his earlier act. The bill was successfully approved in 1993 and finally in the past several years lands along Village Creek owned by timber interests

were acquired by the National Park Service and added to Big Thicket National Preserve.

During the clear-cutting wars in the National Forests in Texas Charlie agreed to and pushed legislation that finally established five wilderness areas in East Texas including the Little Lake Creek Wilderness Area in Sam Houston National Forest; Big Slough Wilderness Area in Davy Crockett National Forest; Turkey Hill and Upland Island Wilderness Areas in Angelina National Forest; and Indian Mounds Wilderness Area in Sabine National Forest. Charlie stood firm against opposition and political heat in his district to establish these wilderness areas. Conservationists are grateful that Charlie could see both sides of an issue.

Charlie also led the charge to de-authorize the Rockland Dam, which would have inundated 160,000 acres of lush East Texas bottomland hardwood forest on the Neches River. De-authorization of a water project is rare in the U.S. Congress but Charlie saw the beauty of the Neches River and the economic importance of timber lands as being worth saving.

We have lost a Big Thicket and wilderness warrior the likes of which will not be seen again.

CONSERVATION FUND AND PARTNERS TAKE GIANT STEPS

BIG THICKET GROWS BY 3,600 ACRES

(Excerpts from news release)

Beaumont (March 11, 2010)—One of the most diverse and sensitive landscapes in America gained further protection recently with the National Park Service’s purchase of more than 3,600 acres of former Hancock Timber land in Hardin and Polk counties from The Conservation Fund. The land will become part of Big Thicket National Preserve...

This purchase establishes a continuous conservation corridor along Village Creek that provides habitat for migratory waterfowl and songbirds and serves as a floodplain that will benefit the communities along Village Creek and the Neches River.

Bruce Drury, president of Big Thicket Association said that “The Conservation Fund has the expertise and capability to bridge the gap between business and government in a way that is highly beneficial to all.”

The NPS and the Texas congressional delegation – Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, Sen. John Cornyn and Rep. Kevin Brady – supported the project’s completion, having secured \$5 million

in federal funding for the purchase from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The National Parks Conservation Association provided assistance with Congressional outreach.

FOREST LEGACY PROJECT

TURKEY CREEK PHASE COMPLETED

(Excerpts from news release)

LUFKIN, Texas (Feb. 31, 2010) – The Conservation Fund, Texas Forest Service and The Campbell Group, LLC, recently completed the state’s largest Forest Legacy project, permanently protecting more than 7,800 acres of forestland surrounding the Big Thicket National Preserve. The project concludes a multi-year effort by the three organizations to conserve working forests and ultimately protect from subdivision and development more than 10,700 acres of environmentally significant forestland adjacent to the Big Thicket’s Turkey Creek Unit.

The Forest Legacy Program, funded by the USDA Forest Service, works with state agencies and local landowners to protect environmentally important forests that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The Conservation Fund, through a grant from the Brown Foundation, also provided funding for the projects.

Texas Forest Service successfully competed for 3.5 million in federal funds to complete the three-phase Turkey Creek Forest Legacy Project. ...

“The easement serves as an important buffer to Big Thicket National Preserve, provides open space and recreation opportunities, provides critical watershed protection and preserves habitat for a number of plant and animal species,” said Jan Davis, staff forester with Texas Forest Service. Texas Forest Service will monitor and enforce the conditions of the easement.

Longleaf Ridge: Texas Forest Service, working in partnership with The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy and The Campbell Group, recently ... was awarded \$1.8 million in Forest Legacy Funds for a new project. The 4,850-acre tract of land is managed by the Campbell Group and located in the Longleaf Ridge Conservation Area ... between the Angelina and Sabine National Forests near Sam Rayburn Reservoir. The project is part of a long-term strategy to protect a contiguous block of forest habitat that serves as a wildlife corridor connecting the two national forests.

The agency also is seeking funding for two additional projects in 2011 near the Sam Rayburn Reservoir: Long Leaf Ridge Phase II, which includes about 8,500 acres managed by the Campbell Group, and the Howard Tract, which is owned by a non-industrial private forest owner and covers about 2,300 acres.

BTA NEWS

Field Trip: Ragan Bounds of Hancock Forest Management Group led a great field trip on the Dogwood Trail near Woodville, Saturday, March 20. Hancock has reclaimed most of the trail from damages of Hurricanes Rita and Ike, but Bounds is looking for volunteers to complete the work. Any takers out there?



The group ate lunch at Heritage Village's Pickett House (yummy!). And then the rains came.

On April 17, Bob Boensch, Southeast Texas Preserve Manager, Nature Conservancy, will lead a field trip to Little RockyCreek, followed by a trip to visit the "blooming" pyramid magnolias in Newton County.

BOARD MEETS JULY 10

The BTA board meets at Village Creek State Park Nature Center, Saturday July 10, 9:30 AM.

An afternoon program will feature Shaun Davis and son with songs and guitar. Davis, a former Wilson aide, is now director of the Southeast Texas Regional Planning Commission. Why not join us for the weekend? We can hike trails, swim, and blather about Big Thicket!

CONSERVATION OUTLOOK

SUPREME COURT DENIES REQUEST FOR NECHES RIVER HEARING

By Janice Bezanson (TCA) and Michael Banks (FoNR) February 22, 2010

The U.S. Supreme Court announced today that the Court will not hear the lawsuit brought by the City of Dallas and Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) against the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge. Dallas and TWDB had sought to block the refuge to keep the site available for a potential future reservoir...

"There is enough water in existing reservoirs for Dallas to have all the water it needs for future growth," added Janice Bezanson, Executive Director of Texas Conservation Alliance. "Dallas could tap Lake Texoma, Wright Patman Reservoir, or Toledo Bend Reservoir for its future supplies" ...

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the site of the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge decades ago as a priority site for conserving habitat for wildlife, songbirds, and migratory waterfowl ... In the long term, up to 25,000 acres may be added to the refuge.

TRINITY RIVER NWR NEWS

Proposed Headquarters Office Construction: The Refuge received deferred maintenance funding in fiscal year 2010 to construct a new administrative facility on the Refuge. In compliance with the NEPA, the Refuge will prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) for this project.

The new administrative facility will include office space for staff and volunteers of the Refuge providing approximately 2700 square feet. If additional funds become available, a 1,500 square foot storage building may be built adjacent to the headquarters. The proposed site will be on Refuge land near the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center on FM 1011, just north of the City of Liberty.

Through the scoping process, the Refuge is seeking public input to facilitate early identification

of issues and concern. A draft EA will be provided for public review through April 19, 2010.

PRESCRIBED BURNS

Big Thicket National Preserve: On January 27, 2010 the Fire Management team completed the Wildwood Prescribed Burn (693 acres) in Hickory Creek Savannah Unit (705 acres). Interagency firefighters from the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and The Nature Conservancy supported the National Park Service during the critical phases of the operation. The unit was burned in five separate blocks, within a three week time period.

Over the past 10 years, multiple wildfires have threatened or burned in the Hickory Creek Unit. Increased fuel loading from two hurricanes within a three year time frame, has required further hazardous fuel reduction. In addition to prescribed fire, herbicide and mechanical treatments have been used to reduce hazardous fuels along the wildland urban interface boundary.

Village Creek State Park: Village Creek State Park, with assistance from Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and Texas Forest Service personnel, performed a prescribed burn on over 75 acres this winter. This was followed by selective thinning of hardwoods and loblolly pines in the same area, and the planting of over 22,000 longleaf pine seedlings in that same area by Raven Environmental Services.

PRESERVE OVERVIEW

by Ann Roberts

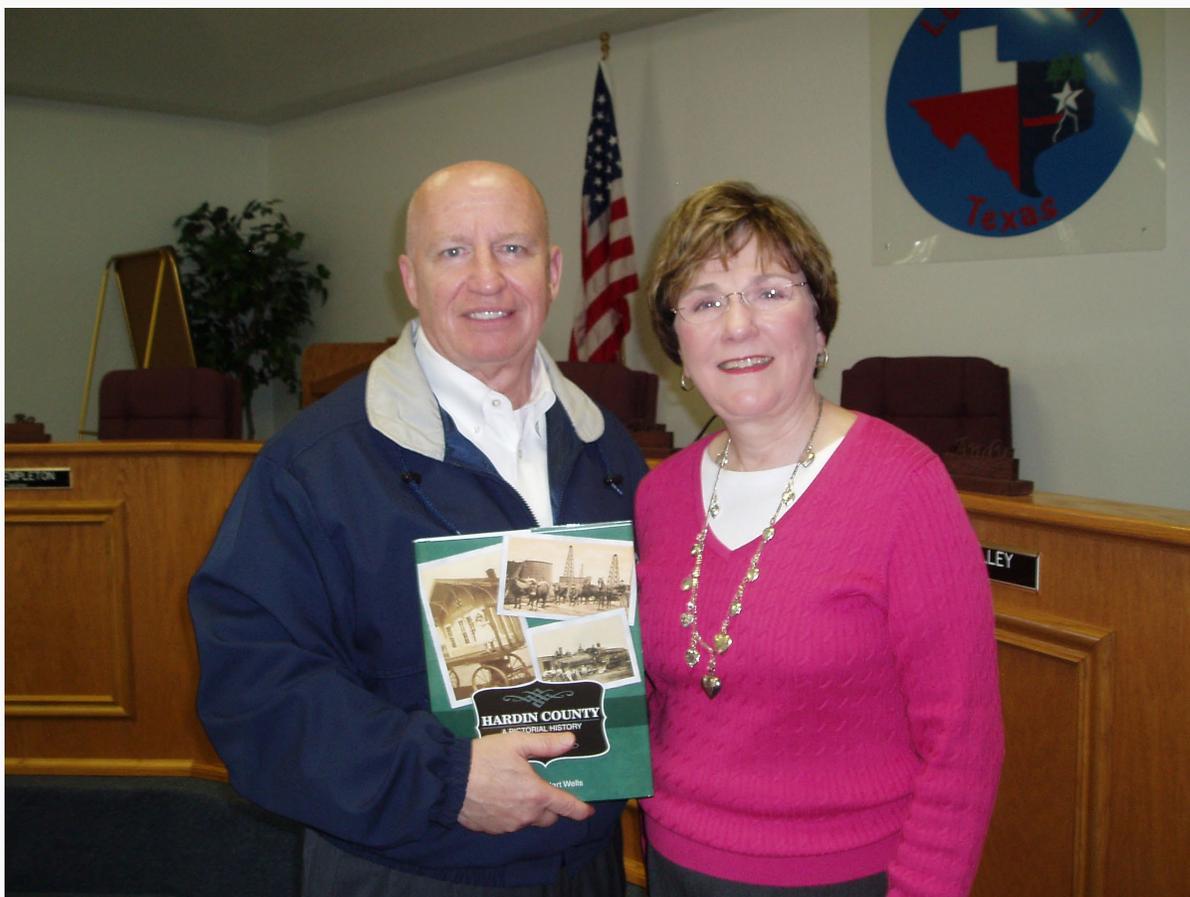
Black Bears: Big Thicket National Preserve hosted an educators' workshop on east Texas black bears on February 27. This workshop was a joint effort between the Preserve and the Houston Zoo, with assistance from Texas Parks and Wildlife. Eighty-five participants from throughout east Texas attended, including school teachers, Texas Master Naturalists, and TP&W staff. Teachers could count three hours of continuing education credit.

Personnel: On March 6, Park Ranger Mary Kay Manning represented the Preserve at the second annual "Get Outdoors!" event held on the grounds of Mission San Jose in San Antonio. The event was co-hosted by San Antonio Missions National Historical Park and the San Antonio River Authority and attracted over 5,300 participants. Over 50 outdoor-related organizations had activity booths there.

At the Big Thicket booth, kids made their own insect-eating pitcher plants, similar to an old-fashioned ball-and-cup toy. Mary Kay thinks her booth was the most popular one there, as kids swarmed to make pitcher plants for over 4 1/2 hours and were still lining up to make them after all the other booths closed down! (BTA members, if you want to make your own bug-eating pitcher plants, just stop by the Big Thicket Visitor Center! It's a lot of fun!)

GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY PUBLISHES HISTORY

The Hardin County Genealogical Society has published *Hardin County: a Pictorial History* (\$50.00) by Renee Hart Wells. The selection of photographs is just a small part of the massive effort that archives county history. At a recent town hall meeting held by Cong. Kevin Brady in Silsbee, the author presented a copy to the Congressman.



YOU DONE GOOD, "CHARLIE"

Big Thicket National Preserve is Cong. Charles Wilson's most enduring legacy for East Texas and the biosphere. Wilson became our representative in 1973, and he pledged to solve the long-standing Big Thicket debate -- and he did. We all owe him big-time!

In 1996 when he left Congress, I wrote his "obituary" including a poem modeled after Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Lament." Years later, someone called the column to his attention, and he called to acknowledge it with amusement.

There has never been a more colorful, engaging, yet productive public official. He had a remarkable record of taking care of the home folks, and his rapport with his constituents was extraordinary. Sometimes he called us affectionately his "rednecks," and your editor has the distinction of being Charlie's "favorite freak" and a "fern fondler."

In his memory, I'm giving donations to the BTA Land Fund and the Legacy Fund.
You can too!

--Editor