

## **BEN WHEELER—BACKGROUND—CONTACTS**

### **Roll On, Ben Wheeler, Roll On**

Jill, I propose a sidebar story to the Edom piece—how tourism is working its magic again, just down the road, at Ben Wheeler.

Three years ago, East Texas natives Brooks and Rese Gremmels began buying up buildings and land in Ben Wheeler, at the time a community in decline. The Gremmels' Ben Wheeler Development Company and Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic Foundation have begun restoring the town to the look of 1935.

The boarded-up Moore's General Store was reborn as a restaurant and music venue. Now a knifeshop, art galleries, guitar and music shop and clothing store--as well as an ice cream store boasting an antique motorcycle gallery--join the old-fashioned feed and seed store along a reviving main street. There's even a new "old" Moon Pie/Royal Crown mural, plus a bistro with wines and beers, soups and salads in a converted blacksmith shop.

The Gremmels' nonprofits are recreating Ben Wheeler, as well, by adding a volunteer fire department, community garden, recycling program, and is in the process of turning an old school into a history museum.

Ben Wheeler was named for the county's first postmaster, but the Gremmels got it officially named the "Wild Hog Capital of Texas" in conjunction with its annual Feral Hog Festival held each October. The festival grounds also host open-air musical jams sessions throughout the year.

Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation, a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation, was created by Brooks and Rese Gremmels to serve as the vehicle for reconstructing, not only the physical aspects of Ben Wheeler, Texas but perhaps, more importantly, returning a sense of community and to the town by providing it with various outlets through music, art, history, education, entrepreneurship, basic civil service and philanthropy.

Bw website:  
Art, Music & Entrepreneurship

What has transpired out of their original goals is a downtown resurrected through some of the key aspects they wanted to weave into it, since the onset of their vision. Today, you can stroll through downtown and have a place to eat, shop and play through the doors of revitalized and rehabilitated buildings from the old downtown and surrounding areas. These old-but-new buildings are now home to: County Line Magazine, Flying Fish Gallery, Harrison & Son Knifeshop, Antiques & Texas Heritage, WhimZee and Moore's Store, a restaurant and live music venue that was once a general store. This year, we The Foundation has also made it possible to open a guitar and music shop called Players and Scoots 'n Scoops, a Blue Bell ice cream shop featuring vintage and racing motorcycles also opened its doors.

History & Education

The Gremmels' efforts to provide and maintain the town's historical integrity continue with the arrival of the old, Elwood Schoolhouse. Moving it in sections, the old schoolhouse began making its way to town at the end of March 2010. Its currently undergoing restoration of the structure

inside and out. When complete, it will be home to the Van Zandt County Museum and Half-Pint Books, a children's library made possible by The Foundation and Half-Price Books. Half Price Books graciously donated 1,200 library books and rolling carts to the library and have committed to donating more, once the library opens. Additionally, Jim Bundscho, was brought on board to manage a community garden with the goal of making it into a true production garden that also serves as a teaching and learning center.

### Civil Service

When Reese and Brooks came to Ben Wheeler, a Firehouse didn't exist to meet basic emergency needs in the town. So, through the Foundation, they had a volunteer firehouse built downtown adjacent to the Festival Grounds. Aside from the fire department duties performed when called upon, the town is also fortunate to have these volunteers ready and willing to help provide basic safety duties during the town's festivals and larger events.

### Community Contributions - Philanthropy & Stewardship

Last year, The Foundation provided more than \$10,000 in scholarships to area college-bound students to help offset some of the costs of tuition and books. Additionally, The Foundation sponsors Boy Scout Troop 363. Other community contributions like mowing lawns for any resident who needs the service and providing other sponsorships to various local youth activities throughout the year, are a top priority.

Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation is proud that 100 percent of its monies are devoted to The Foundation. None of the funds go to administration or management fees.

## **BEN WHEELER**

Ben Wheeler, named for the first man to carry mail into Van Zandt County

### Veronica Terres

Begun in 2008, Ben Wheeler Development Company (BWDC) founded by Brooks Gremmels and Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic Foundation (BWA & HF), a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation created by ET natives, Brooks and his wife Reese Gremmels...

For more than 20 years, he managed oil and gas companies that operated several hundred wells. He also was president and CEO of WhamTech, which developed virtual data and information integration, sharing, and interoperability technology products. He started racing with the Central Motorcycle Roadracing Association in 1999 (well past his 50th birthday) and won several road-racing sprint championships. He served on CMRA's board of directors and was named to its hall of fame. In connection with his racing career, he founded Shogun Enterprises and Shogun Motorsports.

.... aesthetic to the way it looked in 1935... Moon Pie/Royal Crown Mural

Through the Foundation, merchants who locate in the center of town will pay \$1 a month rent, plus utilities after a thorough application and selection process.

The first "tenant" was Nick Brockway, who's operated N&B Feed & Fertilizer downtown for 17 years. The second tenant is a regional publication, County Line Magazine, owned by publisher, P.A. Geddy,

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Elwood Schoolhouse, will be home to the Van Zandt County Museum and Half-Pint Books, a children's library made possible by The Foundation and Half-Price Books.

Fall Feral Hog Fest on October (got town designated as "Wild Hog Capital of Texas."), antique car shows, grassroots music jams

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FM 279, Downtown Ben Wheeler

Ben Wheeler Development Company -Veronica Terres; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
Ben Wheeler TX 75754

[www.benwheelertx.com](http://www.benwheelertx.com)

**Brooks Gremmels**, the cofounder of Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation

...w/ the Van Zandt County Historical Commission

old **Elwood School**, almost century-old, four-room, woodframe-structure previously located between

Wills Point and Edgewood; The two layers of exterior paint were scraped off

and reapplied to match the original hue. The tin

shingles have been restored and meticulously

replaced, and windows with hand-blown glass

from France have been primed, painted and are

being installed as you read this. Additionally,

the old sash-weight windows have also been

restored to operate the way they did in the

past.

At the end of last year, while undergoing

inside renovations and paint removal, workers

discovered a green border underneath the paint.

It's thought to be the old black board teachers

and students once used. Since that discovery, the

interior looks like new again with the original

paint color matched and back on the walls.

The wood floors are laid and being sanded –

and final touches continue to move forward.

Even old-school details such as four fireplaces residing in the building will be in working order ...won't be museum since can't be a/c

**--Artists & Merchants Association of Ben Wheeler**

hosting monthly Second Saturday events, called 279 Artisans Trail downtown from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Guests and art lovers alike can enjoy resident and out-of-town artists' works as well as live music and workshop demonstrations. 279 Artisans Trail is scheduled for Saturday, April 9

Hog Fest

CONTACTS:

**The Forge Bistro;**

Nestled within an old blacksmith shop, this unique bistro houses a handcrafted rustic cedar bar and features a delicious menu of simple, yet flavor-filled food created by Executive Chef Christian Chavanne. It features live entertainment most Fridays & Saturday Tuesday & Wednesday, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Thursday through Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Closed on Sundays.

March Acoustic Music @ The Forge • 7 p.m. • No Cover

**-- Harrison & Son Knifsmith Dan Harrison**

Renowned handcrafted knifsmith presents a large selection of hunting and collector knives; next door to N&B Feed & Fertilizer! Now open Sundays, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**--Flying Fish Gallery Randy and Sherri Martin**

Last year, The Flying Fish Gallery opened its doors to the public. Artist and gallery owners bring you a collection of their art for the home and garden. A variety of artists are also represented from fine to funk, silver to rust and simple to complex. The gallery features an Artist of the Month showcasing their talents. Come share they're excitement and passion for the arts, music, food and history in Ben Wheeler.

Wednesday & Thursday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday & Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Sundays • 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Danny and Jared Hollis will provide music for the day.

██████████ or e-mail ██████████

**--Sojourn Gallery Mary Hortman**

Fine art portraits and oil & water color paintings

Tues. – Sat. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. & Open Sunday Afternoons!

Wednesday & Saturday Fine Art Classes Call ██████████ for more info.

Fine Art Workshops w/Mary 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. once a month. \$75. Call ██████████

**-- Wagon Wheel Forge & Gallery Lonnie, Linda Jody (son) Robinson**

utilize blacksmithing techniques stretching back to the 1800s. This working museum houses a utilizes a forge -- a hearth used to heat up metal and classic tools of the trade. Call

██████████.

--**Rave Art Gallery** Dyan Johnson + Craig & Jan Blackmon

Dyan Johnson Studio Metal 903.469.4611

Craig & Jan Blackmon-- Edom Ranch Art214.616.0496

Wed. 10:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Thurs. - Sat. 10:30 a.m. - 8 p.m. Sun. 10:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

-- **Scots 'n Scoops**

Ice cream and motorcycles are two treats made into one for children and big kids at heart. Enjoy an assortment of Blue Bell ice cream while you explore a gallery of vintage motorcycles. Seasonal delights like hot chocolate in the winter will be served along with gourmet coffees regularly. call 903.833.1070.

--**Players** Danny Hollis

This past spring, local musician and frequent Moore's Store headliner, Danny Hollis opened the doors of his new music store, Players.

Mercy River Boys and recorded for Word Records, a well-known Christian record label...opened up for famous country singers like Charlie Daniels, Crystal Gayle and The OakRidge Boys Tuesdays & Wednesdays 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays & Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m-- closed Sundays and Mondays. call 903.833.5614.

**Antiques & Texas Heritage** Joan Hallmark; Carolyn West

Thursday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. call 903.445.5920

**WhimZee** Laura West

A women's and children's clothing boutique. Thursday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. call 903.445.5920

**County Line Magazine** P.A. Geddie

, owner and publisher of her 10-year-old publication; 903.833.2084

Handbook Online

**BEN WHEELER, TEXAS.** Ben Wheeler is on State Highway 64 and Farm roads 279 and 858 twelve miles southeast of Canton in southeast central Van Zandt County. The community is surrounded by springs in rich farming country that was originally part of Henderson County. The site was settled in the 1840s. Kentucky native Benjamin F. Wheeler, who arrived from New Orleans around 1847 and obtained a grant of 640 acres at Creagleville, near Grand Saline, carried the mail to the community in the early years. The community was called Clough, for prominent settler George Washington Clough. In 1876 a post office was established at his home, with Clough as the first postmaster. The community was named for Ben Wheeler in 1878. Wheeler carried the mail from Tyler to Buffalo, staying the night with his friend Clough. In the early 1880s George Clough built a general store, a schoolhouse, and a church one mile east of the present townsite and applied to move the post office and change the name to Georgetown. While the post office was moved, there was already another Georgetown in Texas, so the community's name remained Ben Wheeler. In 1888 Ben Wheeler had three churches, a district school, saw and grist mills, two syrup mills, cotton gins, and a general store.

The Alamo Institute, a local coeducational boarding school established by J. F. Davidson in 1891, had an enrollment of 142 in 1903. Before 1893, when a fire destroyed most of its structures, Ben Wheeler had seven stores, three gin-and-mill combinations, boarding houses,

two churches, and the Berry Resort Hotel. In 1896 the population was 500, but a smallpox epidemic reduced the residents to 238 by 1904, when school enrollment was 163. A grocery store was established at Ben Wheeler in 1905, and in 1919 the town had a bank, a school, two churches, two cotton gins, a corn mill, the weekly *Headlight*, and an annual fair. With the growth of the nearby Van oilfield, hotels and dance halls opened. The population reached 375 in 1933. During the 1930s the cotton market fell, and many local farmers turned to truck farming. Businesses expanded to eighteen by 1943, dwindled to nine by 1972, and rose to twenty-two by 1988. Many farmers turned to cattle raising in the 1960s. The school was consolidated with the Van Independent School District in 1966. In 2000 the community reported a population of 400 and eighty-seven businesses. The Prairie Springs and Asbury cemeteries are located nearby.