



Brooks Gremmels, the man behind Ben Wheeler's revival, stands at the entrance to his Ben Wheeler Development Company along with employee and special events coordinator Jennifer McMahon.

Ben Wheeler Fast-Forwards to 1935

Back in the “good ole days,” Ben Wheeler, Texas, a cross-roads community southeast of Canton and just west of Tyler, was considered a model of commerce. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the town boasted several general stores, a resort hotel, a bank, cotton gins, syrup mills, gristmills and a sawmill. There were also other shops and businesses that added to the quality and necessity of life such as barbers, tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths, a lumberyard, boarding houses, a movie theater, a bank and two churches. A four-year college called the Alamo Institute, which later became Ben Wheeler High School, further elevated the town's stature.

Over the years, like many Texas towns, even though the population had increased, the city center had begun to take on an abandoned feel, with stores and homesteads boarded up and derelict. Brooks Gremmels, now retired from the oil and gas industry and several other ventures, is one who remembers the glory days of Ben Wheeler from his boyhood in Tyler during the early 1950s.

When Brooks and his wife, Rese, decided to make Ben Wheeler their home in 2004, Brooks found that his fond memories could not peaceably coexist with the town's decline. So, as a man of boundless energy, many ideas and a philanthropic heart, he set about working to restore the sense of community and civic pride. His vision and action so far is to ensure the town regains some of its past luster while keeping a nostalgic charm.

His benchmark is the mid-1930s era, when in addition

to enjoying bustling commerce, the town's citizens gathered to share news, support one another and enjoy fellowship and entertainment.

Of his venture, Brooks says, “I worked my whole life to get back to East Texas. We moved back down here to retire.” But, the more he saw abandoned and derelict properties around his ideal retirement community, the more it got under his skin. And anyone who spends a little time with Brooks soon learns that he's a man of action; and if he sees something that needs “fixin”, he'd just as soon do it himself than wait for something to happen.

At first Brooks just bought a house or two, with the idea of tearing down the eyesores, but he said he realized that some of those houses had potential. So, he hired crews to repair them, and he now owns upward of 15 houses near downtown and rents some with plans to use the others for bed-and-breakfasts. Meanwhile, Brooks turned his attention downtown to all of the closed storefronts. Building by building, he's gained ownership and has begun gutting and rebuilding to standards that retain the charm but leave the buildings serviceable and functional.

Simultaneously, as his acquisitions grew, so did his vision and so did his projects. He says that as people began to see the town cleaned up, they started paying attention.

To build on that excitement, after he had the park cleaned up and spruced up, he built a “picking porch” stage for local musical gatherings. Now, from spring through fall,

every Thursday night, local musicians gather to make music for themselves and for others who come to listen.

This small momentum gave Brooks a bigger head of steam, and he decided that there should be a big event that would make an impact. So, he threw his first party last Fourth of July.

The public party, paid for by Brooks and his wife, included serving 3,400 free hotdogs and trimmings to all the guests. There was live music and other entertainment.

As the locals came out to participate Brooks says, "There was an immediate rekindling of the community that you could see." He said residents were remarking, "We are seeing people we have not seen in 35 years!"

Because that first event was so successful, Brooks followed it with several other events, like the Fall Feral Hawg Fest, which drew more than 5,000 people, and the Christmas Celebration and Lighted Parade, which will also become annual events. He's also planning a Ben Wheeler Birthday Bash, as well as an Easter egg hunt, with both to focus on family fun.

Along the way, he has pulled in a multitude of locals and has nine full-time employees at the company he started, Ben Wheeler Development Company. He subcontracts out work to many others. To date, Brooks has spent upward of \$3 million of his own cash to do the things he feels need doing, and he proudly says, "We've done what we have done with no partners, no banks and no debt."

Even as the economy slows, Brooks' vision has not, and his



FROM TOP: All things porcine ruled the day at the first Fall Feral Hawg Fest in Ben Wheeler, and this little reveler was the prettiest piglet of them all. During the pig race, the target swine ziggled and zagged like greased lightning, but eventually one lucky contestant was able to claim the catch.

plans keep churning. While he simultaneously rebuilds downtown, he has designed and will begin construction of a café on Highway 64. He'll call this place Happy Trails Café, and he says "cowboy food" will be on the menu. But, that's only the first restaurant on his plate, so to speak. The Moore's Store in downtown Ben Wheeler is reaching completion and will be a combination restaurant and musical entertainment center. He also has plans for more, with the ultimate goal of having them all served by a central commissary that stores locally grown and fresh ingredients.

Then, there's the nonprofit that Brooks and Rese created called the Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation, which is also coming together downtown. An artists' enclave is in the making, with historic buildings being gutted to modernize the interiors while preserving the historical façades. Hammers are ringing in just about every building to make the adjustments to eventually house artists, a theater for

live productions and a working blacksmith's shop.

Tenants already have made commitments for many of the spaces, and the first to move in was *County Line Magazine*, which focuses on the entertainment and arts of East Texas. And spaces are now being built out for Wild Woods of Texas, an artisan furniture maker, Randy Martin's Flying Fish Gallery and a studio for Mary Hortman, a portrait painter. This town will be for admiring and purchasing art,

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Every town needs a queen, and even though Rese Gremmels is not official Ben Wheeler royalty, she did strike a regal pose during the parade that preceded the Fall Feral Hawg Fest—and she's the undisputed Queen of Hearts of husband Brooks.

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taking in historical culture and just strolling. But Brooks is also building several of what he calls “music porches,” for just sitting and enjoying music. He says, “We want there to be music in this town, and we will do everything we can to encourage it.”

If it seems like sawdust is flying in every direction, that’s because it is. Board by board and brick by brick, there’s an entire town being built. And, with each nail or bit of spackle, satisfaction is being created too. A sense of community and civic pride is now in the air at Ben Wheeler. Brooks said, “It’s almost as if you have to do it first to show it’s possible. The town is the project, but the businesses are the cogs in the wheel.”

So, Brooks is building businesses, he’s renovating parks, remodeling or adding to open

spaces and investing his own money and time to do it. His plan calls for Ben Wheeler to be a self-sustaining community that is family-oriented and an affordable destination place for visitors. But he wants to accomplish that while retaining the charm and sense of community for the current and future residents. And, integral to the plan, he’s ensuring that all of the pieces complement one another.

Stay around Brooks Gremmels very long and with each sunbeam that seems to dance around him, you’ll see his many facets: businessman, philanthropist, visionary, activist, city planner, patron of the arts, civic leader, developer and community organizer. But, whatever hat he is wearing, it would be fair to say that he aims to see a rebirth of a small town named after a mule-riding mail carrier, and that’s worth talking about.

The Ben Wheeler Development Company and the Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation are members of Wood County Electric Cooperative. To learn more about them visit: www.vzcounty.com/ben.htm or call (903) 833-1070.

UPCOMING BEN WHEELER FAMILY-FRIENDLY EVENTS

- Easter Egg Hunt—April 11**
- Ben Wheeler’s Birthday Bash—May 23**
- 2nd Annual Fourth of July Celebration—July 4**
- 2nd Annual Fall Feral Hawg Fest—4th Weekend in October**
- 2nd Annual Christmas Parade—December 5**

References:

- Van Zandt County Genealogical Society, www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txvzcg/vzgs.htm*
- Ben Wheeler Fire Department, www.benwheelerfd.com*

WCEC Protects Against Identity Theft

Maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of our members’ personal information is a priority at Wood County Electric Cooperative, and we take our responsibilities seriously. Therefore, we comply with the Federal Trade Commission’s “Red Flags” rule, which acts as an important safeguard against identity theft. The government identifies a red flag as a pattern, practice or activity that indicates the possibility of attempted identity theft.

WCEC employs the best practices and technology to ensure members’ information can’t be used for fraudulent purposes.

For example, we perform credit and identity-fraud checks upon new member sign-up. When new members apply, we check personal identifying information with a consumer reporting agency to help identify possible fraud. This agency also helps us make a decision about deposit requirements for members based on their credit history.

We also use the latest in computer hardware, software and network protection products and practices. Even though we haven’t been involved in any cases of identity theft of our members’ data, nor have we had any records breaches, we know we must remain vigilant when it comes to safeguarding your data. The technology we’re using is a stable, proven system that will guard our members’ information and at the same time comply with the governmental mandate.

At WCEC, we are doing our part, but we’d also like to remind members to help us keep them protected. It’s important for all members to keep their contact records current so we can reach them via phone or mail, when possible.

Legal Notice

The Elections Committee of Wood County Electric Cooperative, Inc., will meet at the cooperative office at 501 S. Main St., Quitman, Texas, at least 40 days prior to the annual meeting. The committee is composed of the following members:

Mr. Glenn E. Morris
268 FM 900 E.
Mount Vernon, TX 75457

Mrs. Carolyn Bryant
201 East Oak
Yantis, TX 75497

Mrs. Judy Peoples
1646 VZ CR 1222
Grand Saline, TX 75140-4628

Mr. Mike Giles
690 PR 8571
Winnsboro, TX 75494

Mr. Clarence Meiske
1547 FM 2659
Hawkins, TX 75765

Dr. Beverly Waddleton
P.O. Box 996
Quitman, TX 75783

Mr. Willie Cicero
1010 State Hwy. 64
Ben Wheeler, TX 75754-4331

This committee shall arrange for a notice to be prepared and posted at the cooperative office at least thirty (30) days before the annual meeting that will include a list of nominations of directors. But any one hundred (100) or more members may make other nominations by official petition but not before January 1 of this year and not less than sixty (60) days prior to the meeting, and the secretary shall post the same at the same place where the list of nominations made by the committee is posted.

The committee shall cause to be mailed, ballots listing all qualified candidates and a notice of the meeting, at least twenty-one (21) days and not more than thirty (30) days prior to the meeting. This shall include a statement of the number of directors to be elected and will show separately the nominations made by the committee and the nominations made by petition, if any. The Elections Committee shall make nominations for directors for Districts 1 and 4. Directors whose terms are expiring: Pat Lindley, District 1, and Brent Glenn, District 4.

The Annual Meeting of Wood County Electric Cooperative, Inc., will be held at 2 p.m. October 9, 2009, at Governor Jim Hogg City Park in Quitman.

Statement of Nondiscrimination

Wood County Electric Cooperative, Inc., is the recipient of federal financial assistance from the Rural Utilities Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and is subject to the provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended; the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991; and the rules and regulations of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In accordance with federal law and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, or disability (not all prohibited bases apply to all programs).

The person responsible for coordinating this orga-

nization's nondiscrimination compliance efforts is Debra L. Robinson, CEO/General Manager. Any individual, or specific class of individuals, who feels that this organization has subjected them to discrimination may obtain further information about the statutes and regulations listed above from and/or file a written complaint with this organization; or write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call 1-800-795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Complaints must be filed within 180 days after the alleged discrimination. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible.

WOOD COUNTY EC TO AWARD \$10K IN SCHOLARSHIPS

Wood County Electric Cooperative (WCEC) is currently taking applications from area students interested in receiving college scholarship money. To be eligible, students must be current members or dependents of active members of WCEC. The applicants must write a 450 to 500 word essay describing themselves and their current interests, plans and goals for the future (educational, professional, personal) and describe why they have chosen their field of study.

These essays should accompany a completed WCEC application, two letters of reference and a school certification of academic standing. All entries must be received at WCEC headquarters by April 1, 2009. Late entries will not be considered.

Once the competition closes, an independent panel of judges will read and score the submissions, with the top 10 scores each winning a \$1,000 college scholarship. To enter, pick up an application at WCEC headquarters at 501 S. Main St. in Quitman, or go online and download one from www.wcec.org/community/programs.html.