

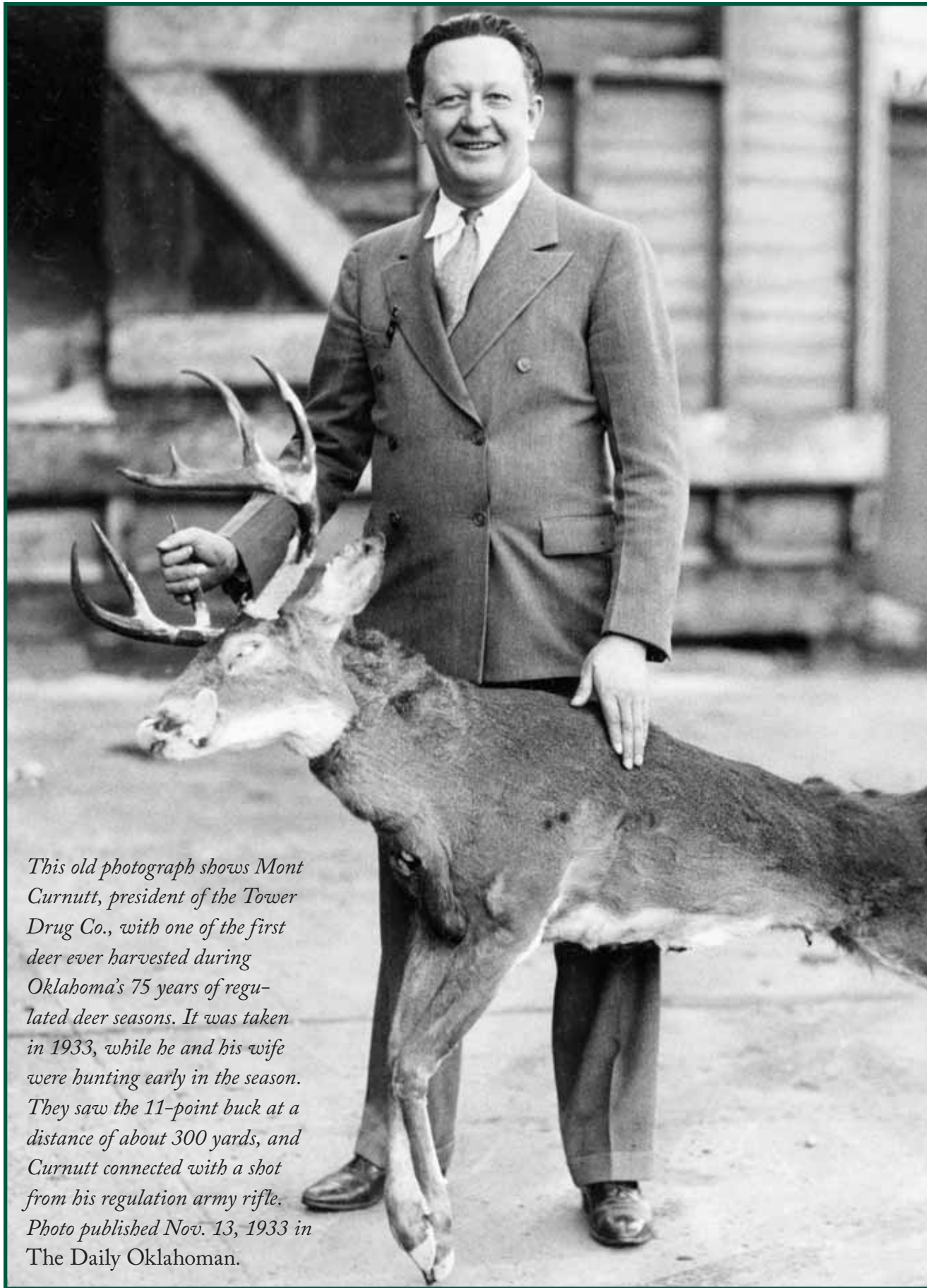
The
History
of a
Heritage

Celebrating 75 Years of Oklahoma Deer Seasons

*“Happy New Year
On this day let us all rejoice in the great
victory over depressing times...
Let us join hearts and hands in the happiness
of the New day...”*

*1933 was a year of trials for all of us...
1934 is the year of genuine opportunity.
Re-employment and steady work will keep
every employee in our shops and plant looking
forward with keen anticipation...
So we say again... Happy New Year!”*

—The Daily Oklahoman, December 31, 1933



This old photograph shows Mont Curnutt, president of the Tower Drug Co., with one of the first deer ever harvested during Oklahoma's 75 years of regulated deer seasons. It was taken in 1933, while he and his wife were hunting early in the season. They saw the 11-point buck at a distance of about 300 yards, and Curnutt connected with a shot from his regulation army rifle. Photo published Nov. 13, 1933 in The Daily Oklahoman.



Robert P. "Warden Bob" Chandler, a newspaperman from Muskogee, was the State Game Warden (head of the Game and Fish Department) during the early days of Oklahoma's deer hunting seasons. Chandler, with his newspaper background, wrote many stories and reports for local newspapers on hunting, fishing and what activities OGF personnel were doing.



Counties Open During '33 Buck Season

- ◆ Atoka
- ◆ Pushmataha
- ◆ McCurtain
- ◆ LeFlore
- ◆ Choctaw
- ◆ Latimer
- ◆ Major

From the dark hours of America's Great Depression, the above message appeared on the 1933 New Year's Eve edition of the Daily Oklahoman.

Despite the crippling effects of a stock market crash, bank failures, unemployment and drought, there were reasons for optimism among Oklahomans at the close of 1933. FDR's "New Deal" reforms had begun to kick in and the American economy was slowly making a turn for the better. For a couple hundred Oklahoma hunters, there was additional reason to give thanks as they sat down for their holiday feasts of '33. Although few could scarcely afford turkey and dressing during the Great Depression, these hunters and their families got to enjoy a special treat — a delicious roast of venison, a meal probably few of them had ever experienced. Earlier that year, the Oklahoma Game and Fish Commission authorized an open season on buck deer, the first such opportunity in years.

Of the estimated 2,000 or so hunters who roamed the woods of south-east Oklahoma or Major County that year, 235 bucks were checked in. This autumn marks 75 years since that historic hunt. In the years that have followed, the restoration of whitetail deer is arguably our state's greatest conservation success story. Through the establishment of deer refuges on many of today's oldest wildlife management areas beginning in the '30s, and then the subsequent trap and transplant programs of the '40s, '50s and '60s, whitetails are now found in abundance throughout all of Oklahoma's 77 counties.

As if going from 235 harvested deer in 1933 to more than 100,000 in the year 2000 isn't a remarkable story in its own right, the story of how the deer season was re-opened after being closed for years provides an interesting case study. And if not for a savvy state game warden with journalistic talents, it might have remained closed for who knows how long.

To understand the significance of the '33 deer hunt, one has to look at the history of deer and deer hunting leading up to that time. Although not totally erased like Oklahoma's bison herds, a heavy toll had been taken on Oklahoma's whitetails due in part to market and subsistence hunting from the 1870s thru statehood in 1907. In a 1912 newspaper article from the Daily Oklahoman, a Bartlesville man writes: "Unless a state law is passed preventing the killing of deer in the Osage country, it is the belief of hunters here that it will be only a few years before this game will have been annihilated in this part of the state. Five years ago, deer in the Osage country were plentiful. Today it believed less than one hundred are in existence" (Nov. 17, 1912 Daily Oklahoman).

In another article from the late teens, a group of quail hunters in the Osage were startled when their pointers jumped a big buck from a thicket — the first deer any of them had seen in years. For all practical purposes, whitetail deer had been eliminated from the western three-quarters of Oklahoma by 1920. Although open seasons on deer were



still being allowed for a few days each November, it was widely believed that poaching was a huge problem and that most of Oklahoma's deer herd was being eliminated through illegal means.

In the '20s, the state Game and Fish Department (OGF) increased their law enforcement staff to approximately 30 full-time officers (called game rangers at the time), plus enlisted numerous "deputized" personnel. Still yet, providing protection to the scattered remnants of white-tails in Oklahoma proved a daunting task. With the land runs of the late 1880s and early '90s, the rural population in Oklahoma was significant even by today's standards, with hungry settlers occupying most every 160-acre tract of tillable land. Obviously, meat was a precious commodity during those days. Accordingly, nearly all rural inhabitants raised chickens for eggs and the skillet. Reaping the bounty of the chicken house, however, required nearly round-the-clock protection from hungry coyotes and other varmints. With loaded side-by-side shotguns at arm's reach, it's not hard to imagine what happened to any wild turkey, quail, duck or deer that may have been spotted on the back 40.

Remember, too, that when the farmer looked both ways to see if anyone was watching (i.e. the game ranger) before he squeezed the trigger, he could probably see for miles around (or at least a great deal further than today). Due to a century of fire-suppression, the Oklahoma landscape looks quite different today than it did back at the time of statehood. The prairies that once covered the western two-thirds of the state were virtually void of trees.

The winds of change for conservation began in these dark days. Disgruntled sportsmen demanded that something be done to preserve Oklahoma's dwindling wildlife. Of course, stocking of quail, deer and other species were suggested and demanded, but realistically, propagation of game was outside of game departments' expertise and abilities in the early 1900s. What was within their capabilities, however, was the propagation of fish. Around the country, game and fish departments went through a "Golden Age" of fish hatchery construction during the early 1900s, including the construction of the Durant State Fish Hatchery, and the hatchery at Medicine Park (now named the James A. Manning Hatchery), which still provide hundreds of thousands of fish to Oklahoma waters today. In fact, the public's demand for fish was much more acute than any calls for the stocking of deer and prairie chickens.

Although habitat restoration was being touted for landowners to bring back deer, quail, prairie chickens and turkeys, it didn't give concerned sportsmen the "tangible," stocking solution they were looking for. They demanded that the game department do something, and do it immediately, before all the wildlife disappeared. About the only thing left for the Game and Fish Department to do was to declare all-out protection on dwindling game species. Beginning in the mid 1910s, most central and western counties were put under a closed deer season, and by 1922, the few remaining southeast counties of the "Kiamish" had been closed.

White-tailed Deer Timeline in Oklahoma

1900

Market/subsistence hunting and unregulated harvest eliminate nearly all deer from the state.

1917

Total statewide deer population estimated at 500 animals.

1917 to 1922

From western Oklahoma moving east, counties previously open to deer hunting are systematically closed to deer hunting.

1922

All deer hunting in Oklahoma is prohibited.

1933

First regulated deer season (five days) is held. Hunt is restricted to six southeast counties and Major County in western Oklahoma, resulting in the harvest of 235 bucks. Also, this year marks the beginning of safety regulations for wearing a red upper outer garment (later to become "hunter" orange).

1934

No deer season authorized.

1935

37 Area is expanded to seven southeast counties only. Harvest total is 331 in 1935; 375 in 1936; and 347 in 1937.

1938

No deer season authorized.

1939-40

Harvest totals: 384 in 1939 and 318 in 1940.

1941-43

All deer hunting is closed. Many OGF personnel are called to active military service.

1943

Deer restoration program starts with the trap and transplant of 22 deer.

1944

379 deer harvested.

1945

A total of 469 deer are harvested. Restoration efforts continue, with most deer trapped from either the Wichita Mountains NWR or Ft. Sill, but includes 50 captured from Aransas Pass NWR on the Texas Gulf coast.

1946

Participation in the deer gun season jumps to more than 7,000 (certainly due to return-





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Game wardens (then called rangers) during one of Oklahoma's very first deer seasons.

However, it wasn't to many years later that the "political winds of the deer issue began to shift back the other direction.

In response to a letter written by a western Oklahoman landowner whose melon crop had been destroyed by deer, OGF Commissioner Chairman, S.H. Harris writes, "True, deer and turkey are killed in Oklahoma every year (at that

time both were under a closed season), and practically at all seasons of the year, notwithstanding the fact that out of our license money enormous expenditures are incurred in the way of attempting to furnish special protection to this class of protected game.

"The initial expense of protecting such game for the sole enjoyment of the lawless or law violators is probably not particularly relished by either the sportsman who puts up the money or the farmer who submits to the depredations (Jan. 26, 1930 Daily Oklahoman article).

By 1931, several newspaper articles were written about the possibility of an upcoming open deer season, but to say it was eminent was premature. In January 1932, a colorful cigar-chomping attorney from Tishomingo took over the reins of the statehouse — William Henry Davis Murray. Known by his nickname, "Alfalfa Bill," Murray became Oklahoma's ninth governor since statehood. One of Murray's lieutenants in his gubernatorial campaign was Robert P. "Bob" Chandler, a newspaperman from Muskogee. Once in office, Murray named Chandler as the State Game Warden (head of the Game and Fish Department) to fill the resignation of Ben E. Mobley.

Chandler, with his newspaper background, must have known well the "power of the pen." After becoming the head of OGF, Chandler began writing stories and reports for local newspapers on a huge variety of topics dealing with hunting, fishing and what activities OGF personnel were doing. His folksy Will Rogers-like prose and honesty quickly became endearing to his readers. In fact, headline writers from The Daily Oklahoman (and perhaps others) began to refer to Chandler simply as "Warden Bob."

Besides writing columns telling people how, where and when to enjoy Oklahoma's hunting and fishing opportunities, Chandler





didn't shy away from controversial topics. He used his columns to fully illustrate the problems of the day, and to lay out solutions to those problems.

In regard to opening deer gun season, Chandler writes: *"We believe a short open season on deer will be generally welcomed and applauded by sportsmen over the state. At the same time we realize that such action is apt to arouse a storm of protest from the noisy minority of so-called conservationists, who are in fact and effect, "Prohibitionists" so far as the taking of any kind of game is concerned...*

"Experience in the past has taught us and is still teaching us that a "closed" season means year-round open season. Sportsmen quite naturally lose interest and the desire to conserve that, which has been perpetually barred to them by means of a closed season...

Old and heavily populated states like New Jersey and those in New England each year have an open season on deer and a majority of those who go into their woods get a buck. And yet, Oklahoma with thousands of square miles of as primeval territory as there is in all this land cannot have enough deer to warrant hunting? Ridiculous.

"The past 11 years experiment has convinced us that the closed season is not the panacea. Therefore, we favor giving a short open season a trial. It's a cinch it cannot be worse. If we are wrong and the short open season does not improve conditions, we shall be the first to admit our mistake. But fairness to the sportsmen and to the deer demands that we seek a way out" (Aug. 13, 1933 Daily Oklahoman).

Central to Chandler's justification of re-opening the deer season was that the closure had not worked to restore the deer population. Despite OGF's best efforts to stop poaching, it was still an enormous problem. But as Chandler surmised, poaching activity would decline if hunters were given at least the occasional opportunity to take a deer legally and ethically. In the summer of 1933, Chandler led a group of OGF Commissioners on tours of the southeast deer country to survey the population with their own eyes. Undoubtedly, Chandler also visited with local sportsmen in the area to promote his philosophy that a closed season on deer, had "de-valued" them as a resource, and thus poaching was a greater problem. With an open season, people would do a better job of "shepherding" their local herd. Plus, having a limited open season would bring much needed commerce to the area in the form of hunters soliciting guide services along with purchases of gas, groceries and hunting supplies.

Although there was stiff opposition, Chandler's rhetoric must have generated enough public support for the Commission to act. Under the authority of Section 3, chapter 27, session laws, 1929, "Alfalfa Bill" Murray and the Oklahoma Game and Fish Commission signed the declaration to open a season on buck deer September 1st, 1933.

The season would be opened in Atoka, Pushmataha, McCurtain, LeFlore, Choctaw, Latimer and Major counties and was set to begin

ing World War II Vets looking for recreation). First archery season (one day) is held. No deer harvested. A total of 35 deer are transplanted from the Wichita Mountains NWR to the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot near McAlester (in less than a decade the military installation, now known as the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant, would serve as a source herd for trapping activities).

1949

Special Archery season (five days) is designated only at Camp Gruber, resulting in the first buck taken by bow and arrow during a regulated season (taken by Roland Barber; the state's first archery buck was a fallow deer that was part of Gruber's small herd that had been established on the area during the late 1930s).

1951

First whitetail deer taken by bow and arrow during a regulated season since the days that Native Americans hunted deer for subsistence is harvested by Larry Embry, Jr., 13. The deer was harvested at Camp Gruber.

1954

First statewide deer gun season (five days) is held, resulting in the harvest of 1,487 bucks.

1969

First primitive firearms season (three days) is held, resulting in two deer harvested. Hunt is restricted to part of LeFlore County.

1970

Statewide 16-day deer gun season is held, yielding a total harvest of 6,882 bucks.

1972

Nine-day deer gun season with special two-day antlerless season is held, yielding a total harvest of 7,670 deer.

1975

Cy Curtis Awards Program initiated by the Department to recognize trophy deer (harvested during the 1972 season and thereafter). For eligibility, whitetail deer must have a minimum typical score of 135, or a non-typical minimum of 150 using the Boone & Crockett scoring system. In the first year, only seven deer are entered. The program is named in honor of the man most responsible for the restoration of whitetail deer in Oklahoma.

1976

Department begins broad scale antlerless harvest in 19 counties by issuing antlerless permits by special drawing. Total harvest is 11,548, of which 26 percent are does.

1982

Antlerless permit system deemed unpopular due





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Pictured in this 75-year-old photograph is Dr. A.C. Hirshfield (left), a respected Oklahoma City physician at the time who was an avid participant in local pointing dog trials, purchasing the very first deer hunting permit sold in Oklahoma.



at 6 a.m. Tuesday November 7 and run through 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, November 11. The hunt was only open to persons who had resided in Oklahoma for a period of one year. If you were a permanent resident of one of the open counties, you could obtain a free permit, but Oklahoma residents who lived outside of one of the open counties were charged a \$5 permit.

Chandler issued a story about the very first deer permit being sold to Dr. A.C. Hirshfield (a respected Oklahoma City physician who was an avid participant in local pointing dog trials). Chandler also wrote a story before the season opener telling hunters that the OGF Ranger Force would be wearing new uniforms “to increase their visibility and to contribute greatly to the morale and tradition of the force.”

The week before the deer season opener, “Warden Bob” also wrote a lengthy column asking for vigilance in keeping the deer season safe.

After the season closed, Chandler was quick to point out that not a single hunting accident had happened during the season. Along with giving the final tally (the majority of the 235 bucks came from McCurtain county), Chandler wrote a hilarious self-deprecating story about his experience deer hunting.

“We wouldn’t take a thousand dollars for our experiences, however, but wouldn’t have gone over the same territory again this week for another grand.” wrote Chandler about his experience hiking up and down steep mountains for the 5-day hunt.

Interestingly, even with the success of the 1933 deer hunt, the OGF Commission did not repeat the declaration the following year, and there was no open deer season in 1934. However, a new OGF administration re-opened the southeast deer zone for the next three years, from 1935-37.

In the spring of 1935, Chandler resigned. In his final column, Chandler includes that he had missed only one week out of the previous 22 months’ columns, when he attended to his father’s funeral. After resigning his post as State Game Warden, Chandler took a position probably well suited to his persona and “gift of gab.” He became



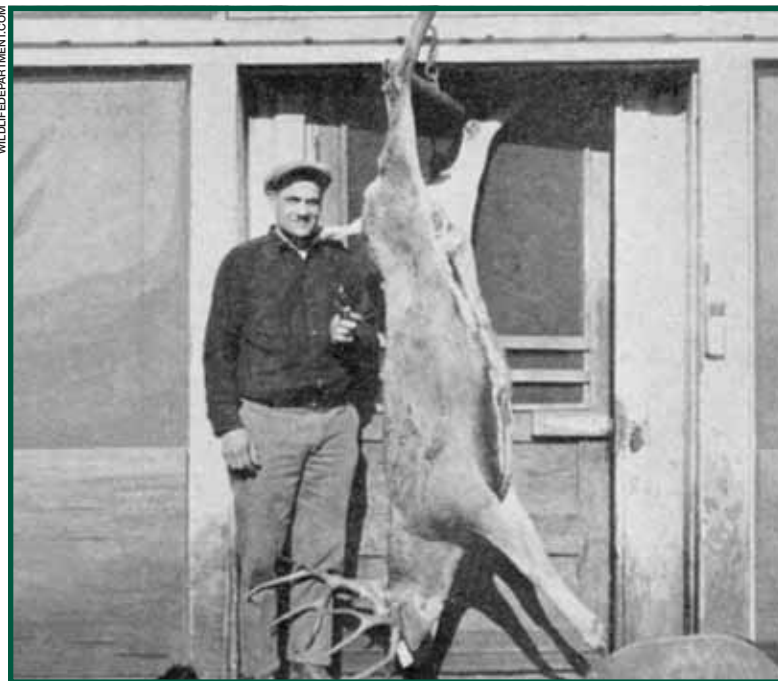
the southwest territory representative of Western Cartridge & Winchester Arms Company.

In 1957, the Oklahoma Game and Fish Department was renamed the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, and today the Department's Information & Education division employs some 20 full-time staff to be the "voice box" of the people, programs, and policies of the agency. Back in 1933, however, there was no such division. Furthermore, there wasn't a Department magazine or weekly television show or the Internet to educate and inform the public regarding conservation issues.

Notwithstanding, "Warden Bob" Chandler still managed to reach out to sportsmen. Through his newspaper submissions written for the "common man," he persuaded sportsmen to set aside their preconceived notions about wildlife regulations and management. He eloquently and fairly made the case that "all-out" protection for a "somewhat abundant" resource was not the answer. With a limited open season on deer, he believed that people would place a greater value on them than if they never got the chance to hunt them. He also held to the belief that Oklahoma's potential for whitetail deer to expand was very high.

And you know what? As attested by this 75th anniversary of Oklahoma's deer season, "Warden Bob" could not have been more right! 🌿

Editor's Note: The Department wishes to thank Linda Lynn, research editor for The Oklahoman, for her assistance with this article.



Big bucks have always been popular with Oklahoma sportsmen, as evidenced by this 1933 photograph.

to perceived inequities and replaced by antlerless days available to all hunters. Total harvest 19,255, of which 23 percent are does.

1986

The Department ceases any further trap and transplant efforts with sufficient populations of deer available to repopulate all suitable habitats statewide.

1990

Statewide deer population is estimated at 250,000 deer. Total harvest is 44,070 deer, of which 24 percent are does.

1992

Total harvest tops 50,000. Much to the surprise of many, a new state record buck is taken by an archer in Oklahoma County (Chris Foutz took the buck, which measured up a 179 6/8 typical score), proving that quality deer can come from just about anywhere in Oklahoma; even the state's most urbanized county.

1999

Statewide deer population is estimated at 425,000 deer. Total harvest is 82,500 deer, of which 36 percent are does.

2000

Deer population levels create a multitude of stakeholder desires and management possibilities. For the first time, deer harvest numbers top 100,000.

2001

First Special Antlerless season is held in December, and antlerless harvest dates during deer archery season are expanded into January.

2003

First statewide youth antlerless deer gun season is held in October and yields 2,285 deer.

2003

Deer gun season is extended to 16 days statewide. Total harvest is 100,602, of which 43 percent are does.

2007

Not one, but two tremendous whitetail bucks are harvested from Pushmataha County during the deer gun season; one by John Ehmer that scored an impressive 194 typical, and one by Jason Boyett that scored 192 5/8 typical. Boyett takes his buck Nov. 18, surpassing the previous state record that had held the top spot for an entire decade. Then just 10 days later, on Nov. 28, Ehmer takes his outstanding buck from the same county. By now, a total of 4,500 deer (including 19 mule deer entries) have been entered into the Cy Curtis Program.



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