

Texas Hill Country Ice Houses were the precursors of Convenience Stores but they were more than places to purchase milk or beer and ice or a few groceries. They were alternative community centers (alternative to churches). Ice Houses were social gathering places. They were places to relax after a long day of riding a tractor or working in the orchard or doctoring cattle and sheep. The Ice House was the place to catch up on local news and gossip, exchange recipes, brag about children, gardens and hunting prowess. The customers were usually local and arrived as regally as the sun. Newcomers were infrequent but welcome while being viewed with cautionary suspicion. That suspicion barrier easily broke however, if the new comer bought a round of beer for the house. If you are looking for a good ice house, keep an eye for an out of the way spot with several pick-up trucks parked around it. In season, it is a plus if there are dead deer in the beds of the trucks with the antlers exposed. If the Ice House has a wood stove well, that's a big plus. These are all good signs that there will likely be a tale or two told within.

My favorite was Luckenbach. Luckenbach was an iconic Texas Hill Country ice house. When my partner and I first purchased it in 1969, German was still the favored language followed by Spanish with English coming in a poor third. When we bought it, the ad in the classified section of the Fredericksburg paper read, "Town for sale, Egg route will make payments." Whether or not Luckenbach constituted a full town is still debated. The main building is divided into 3 sections. It had a Post Office in the front part of the store that connected to the general store area, where customers would give us their shopping lists and we selected the items from the shelves or vegetable baskets. The rear of the building was the bar area, the real heart of the town and the main gathering center. During warm weather we kept the doors on each side of the bar open. Sometimes chickens wandered through. On cold days, we heated the bar area with a wood stove which stood in a sand filled box to keep the floor from catching fire. There is something about a wood stove or an open fire that cannot be matched with central heat, gas or electric. Maybe it's just the delicious anticipation of the cold side of the body waiting for its certain turn to be warmed. Occasionally, when business was slow, we would build an open fire in a circle of rocks under the oaks behind the store. An open fire outside on a cold night is pure magic, especially as the guitars and the conversations grow silent and the fiery logs morph into glowing embers that begin to crumble into quiet explosions like miniature showers of falling stars. The great Western artist, Charlie Russell wrote, "We sat with the world's greatest philosopher, the fire"

During the early days of Luckenbach we received a lot of publicity from a Dallas friend and reporter named Frank X Tolbert. Consequently, we had a lot of deer hunters from Dallas stop by during deer season. One cold fall evening a lone hunter from Dallas came wandering in and stood at the bar. He seemed like a nice fellow. I could tell he was a hunter by his outfit. He looked just like Elmer Fudd in "A Hunting We Will Go," same outfit, hat and all. He bought a round of beer for the small crowd gathered and pontificated on several subjects then announced, "I like to hunt deer but, I don't like the taste of veni-



son. It's too gamey". Elmer continued, "now, I am told there are two solutions. One solution is to cut off the antlers as soon as you kill a deer and that will help prevent the gamey flavor. The other solution is to cut off the scent glands on the inside part of the legs and that will help." He turned to Benny, a local farmer, who was putting another stick of oak in the stove. "I imagine you've killed a

lot of deer in your time, old timer. When you shoot a deer, what's the first thing you cut off?" Benny shut the door of the stove with his shoe, picked up his beer, took a swallow and said, "the first thing I cut off is my headlight". Keep yer trigger happy!

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MILLER FARMS

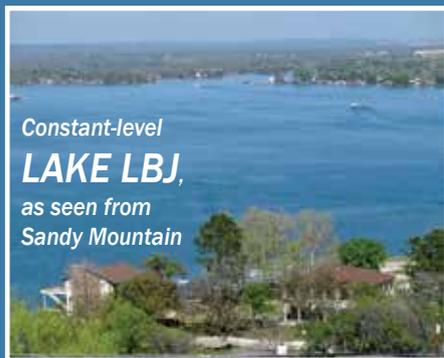
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