

AL BROTHERS:

DEER MANAGEMENT PIONEER & PLM

By Jason Shipman

Al Brothers' name is synonymous with whitetail deer management. His name is among the short list of folks who are given credit with pioneering deer management in Texas as we know it today. Brothers is a native of Gonzales County, Texas, where he was born August 22, 1935 at his grandfather's house about two blocks south of the Gonzales courthouse. He grew up in the country with his two brothers; a twin and a younger brother where they learned ranching practices firsthand. His family raised cattle and he began working at the age of 11, with one of his first jobs being at the livestock auction sale barn for the Gonzales Commission.

Brothers spent his formative years hunting the river bottoms for squirrels on the family home place near Gonzales where Peach Creek converges with the Guadalupe River. He killed his first buck, a five pointer, in 1947 at the age of 12. "I was just as excited about killing that buck as any deer I have ever killed," he remembered. He was hooked and hunted deer every year thereafter. "From that point on, I never missed an opening day of deer season until my freshman year at Texas A&M. That year I had to wait until the Christmas holidays," he added. Later around 1956, his family moved from the home place to the northern part of Gonzales County, but that did not keep him from deer hunting on his uncle's portion of the original old home place. "The day before the opening of deer season, I would get on the bus in the morning and hand the bus driver, Mr. Jackson, my dad's old Winchester .30-30 in a saddle scabbard," he explained. "He would pass the gun along to another driver, Mr. Noon, who drove the route that went past my uncle's place at the old homestead. After school, I would ride the bus to my uncle's house; Mr. Noon would hand me my gun, and I would spend the

night and be ready to hunt in the morning. We had some good times back then."

Upon graduating from high school, Brothers was really undecided on what to do, and just went to work. His twin brother had received a scholarship to Texas A&M and worked at the registrar's

office. Brothers went for a weekend visit and while waiting in the office for his brother to get off work, picked up a book on major coursework. Brother's explained, "As I flipped through it, I realized that lo and behold, there was a major for wildlife management and that



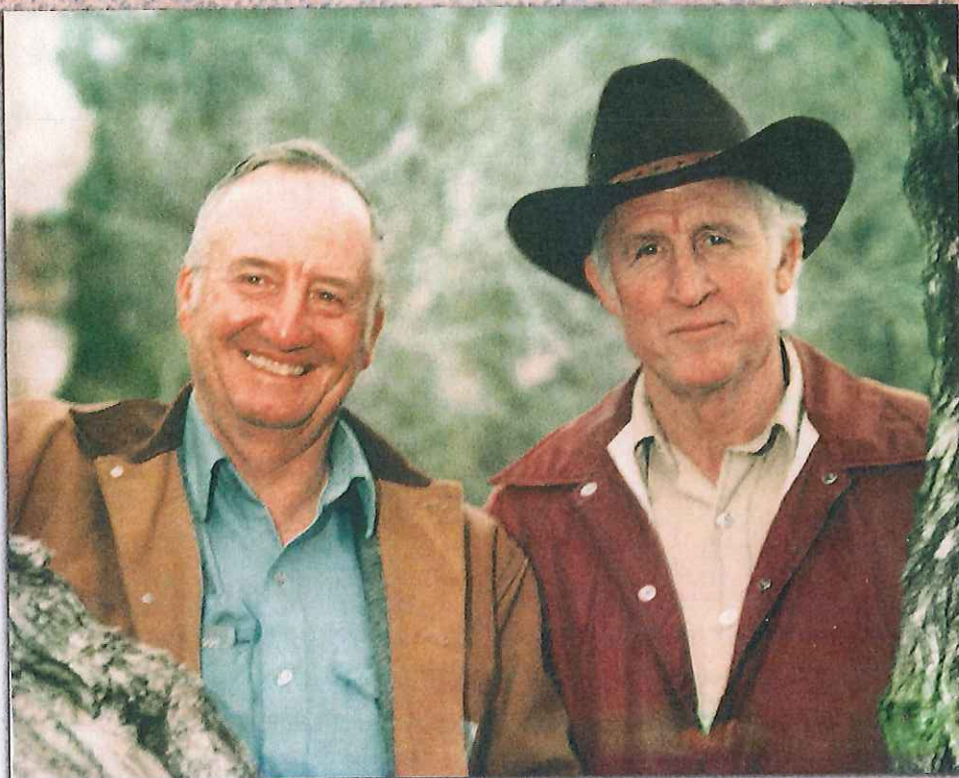
BROTHERS PHOTOS

Al Brothers, a pioneer in deer management and a co-author of several books on the subject, has been a Platinum Life Member since 2002.

is what I wanted to do! We didn't have guidance counselors in high school back then, and I didn't know wildlife management was an option."

Long story short, he sent A&M his high school transcript, which turned out wasn't worth a flip. He was lacking a few classes, but was motivated and went back to high school making straight A's to complete them. "I was the first and maybe the only person to have graduated from Gonzales High School twice!" he said with a laugh.

While at A&M, Al participated on the rifle team and was an intramural sports manager. He was also active in the Fish and Game Club and served as its president his senior year. "There weren't many wildlife students back then, and A&M was really the only school at the time that was offering the courses," explained Brothers. "It was everything I could have hoped for and turned out to be the start of a great career." Brothers went on to graduate class of 1960 from A&M and upon graduation, served in the U. S. Army for two years to fulfill his obligation. After the Army, he went to work for what was then called the Texas Game & Fish Commission in 1963. Brothers worked for the Commission for 2½ years in the Webb and Dimmit County areas. During his tenure the Commission would transition into what is now the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).



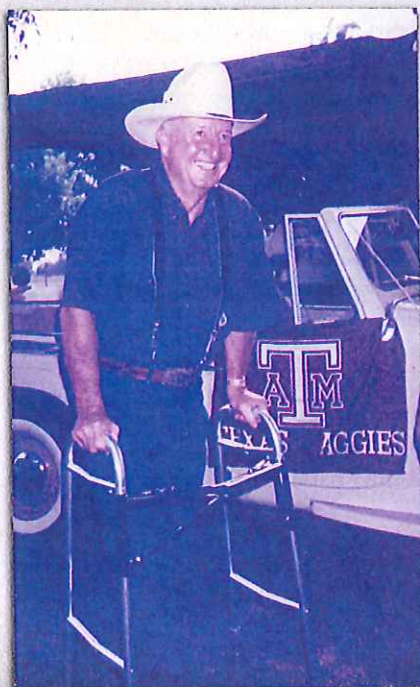
Al Brothers with Horace Gore. They've been close friends since their days at Texas A&M University.

In 1964 while with TPWD, Al and Tom Moore, a TPWD Regional Supervisor who was at the time stationed in Rockport, flew what was probably the first helicopter survey in South Texas on a ranch upriver from Laredo. Afterwards, Al continued to fly experimental helicopter surveys. He often flew with Frank Hamer, Jr., the son of Frank

Hamer, a Texas Ranger known for his involvement in the demise of Bonnie and Clyde.

Brothers left TPWD in 1966 for the private sector and the opportunity to manage the H.B. Zachary ranches located in Webb, Zapata, and Jim Hogg Counties of South Texas, and in Grand and San Juan Counties of Utah. He wel-

LEFT: Brothers at his retirement celebration from Zachry Corporation. RIGHT: Brothers and Gore with Al's Utah bull elk.





Brothers with one of his many whitetail trophies, which he proudly displays at his home.

comed the opportunity, and also wanted to return to the country and raise his family in a ranching environment. At the time, Texas A&I (and later, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M Kingsville) was conducting practical research with management implications. This research was cutting edge and basically new to everyone. The Zachary ranches participated in a number of research projects under the direction of Charlie DeYoung and Lynn Drawe. They conducted some of the first whitetail deer food habit studies in South Texas as well as one of the first mark and recapture studies to test the validity of helicopter surveys.

At the time all of these concepts were new, and there was no protocol. They were inventing the wheel, so to speak, of modern-day deer management. Brothers realized that there was a problem getting this information to the public. "The research wasn't being distributed to the people who could use it in a language they could understand," he explained. Recognizing the need, in 1975 he coauthored along with Murphy Ray, Jr. the book *Producing Quality Whitetails*. The book was a game changer and it would later be widely recognized and referred to as the "bible of Texas Deer Management." It is a timeless classic and a must read for anyone interested in deer or deer management. Around the same time, Jerry Johnston came to Brothers with a vision and an idea to start a hunting magazine. "I thought it was a great idea and agreed to write for the new

publication," said Brothers. He used his column called "Ask Al" to continue to distribute information to the public that was relative to deer management.

Not too long thereafter, on one fateful day in 1976, Brothers, along with a pilot and additional observer, flew across a deep canyon along the Rio Grande while flying for a helicopter survey in Webb County. The pilot saw the power lines at the last minute and tried to correct, but the skids caught the wires flipping the helicopter over and resulting in a crash that would confine Brothers to a wheelchair. The rest of the crew fared better, and the accident slowed Brothers down, but didn't stop him. He continued with his passion of managing and hunting whitetail deer. He went on to complete a 30-year career with the Zachary ranches and authored a number of popular and technical articles in addition to coauthoring with Murphy Ray, Jr., a revised edition of *Producing Quality Whitetails* in 1998 and coauthoring with Dave Richards, a book entitled *Observing and Evaluating Whitetails* in 2003.

Brothers is now retired to his family ranch near Berclair, Texas, located in Goliad County. Last hunting season he killed his best buck to date from the ranch, which won an award at the Muy Grande Deer Contest. When asked which hunt stands out in his memory as the fondest, he smiles, and answers, "All of them! I've never been on a hunt that I didn't like or enjoy, and at this stage of my career I do more watching and filming than shooting. I like every aspect

of the deer program—be it hunting, raising them, or taking care of the land. I like all of it!"

Brothers previously predicted the proliferation of high fences along with some form of buck control. We have seen these events come to fruition over the years with high fencing gaining popularity and the advent of Managed Lands Deer Permits along with special antler restriction counties.

Brothers' association with TTHA continues through his occasional articles he writes for *The Journal*. He's been heard to say it's the best whitetail magazine in the United States. "I've been a Platinum Life Member for a long time. It's great to still be associated with Texas Trophy Hunters Association," he said.

When asked what the future of management holds, he thinks land fragmentation will continue to be the biggest challenge with emphasis on wildlife management co-ops and habitat becoming increasingly important. Improving hunter opportunities also ranks high on his list. "We need to look at the big picture and not lose sight of what we are managing for in the first place." It did not occur to Brothers that his career would begin such a revolution with its beginnings in Texas and now spreading nationwide. To be considered a deer management pioneer is a thing he humbly dismisses, yet insists that he just enjoys helping people on a grassroots level. "Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than to help someone who seeks assistance to better their program." 