



## West Virginia's Celebration of



# NATIONAL HUNTING AND FISHING DAY®

By Jerry Westfall  
and Art Shomo

## Its History and Purpose

Every year, on the fourth full weekend in September, something special happens. All across the country, Americans come together to celebrate their love of hunting and fishing. So you never heard about this exciting event? It's called National Hunting and Fishing Day, and is sponsored by many state wildlife agencies all over the United States. West Virginia is no exception, as the state will celebrate its 35th annual National Hunting and Fishing Day (NH&FD) Celebration on September 22-23, 2012. This event is jointly sponsored by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources and the West Virginia Wildlife Federation.

The history of the NH&FD movement takes us back to the 1960s, when hunters and anglers were interested in the ideas promoted by the growing environmental movement. They understood long before the 1960s that wildlife is intricately associated with habitat, and that habitat destruction or degradation negatively affected wildlife. They were dismayed, however, that the contributions hunters and anglers made to habitat protection and enhancement were not being communicated to the public. People did not understand the critical role hunters and anglers play in conservation.



*Left to Right: Shooting air rifles at the 1978 celebration at French Creek. Crowd at Stonewall Resort State Park watches the headline event. The late Rev. Stacy Groscup demonstrates the use of a blow gun. Master longbow archer Byron Ferguson performs a trick shot.*

*DNR photos*

The first suggestion for a day recognizing the conservation role played by hunters and anglers originated in Pennsylvania. Ira Joffe, owner of Joffe's Gun Shop in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, brought this idea to state officials. In 1970, Pennsylvania Governor Raymond Shafer, liked the idea so well that he created "Outdoor Sportsman's Day" in the state. With prompting from the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the success and popularity of this celebration soon came to the floor of the U.S. Senate. In June 1971, Thomas McIntyre, a U.S. Senator from New Hampshire, introduced Joint Resolution 117 authorizing National Hunting and Fishing Day on the fourth Saturday of every September. An identical bill was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Florida Rep. Bob Sikes. Congress unanimously passed both bills in early 1972.

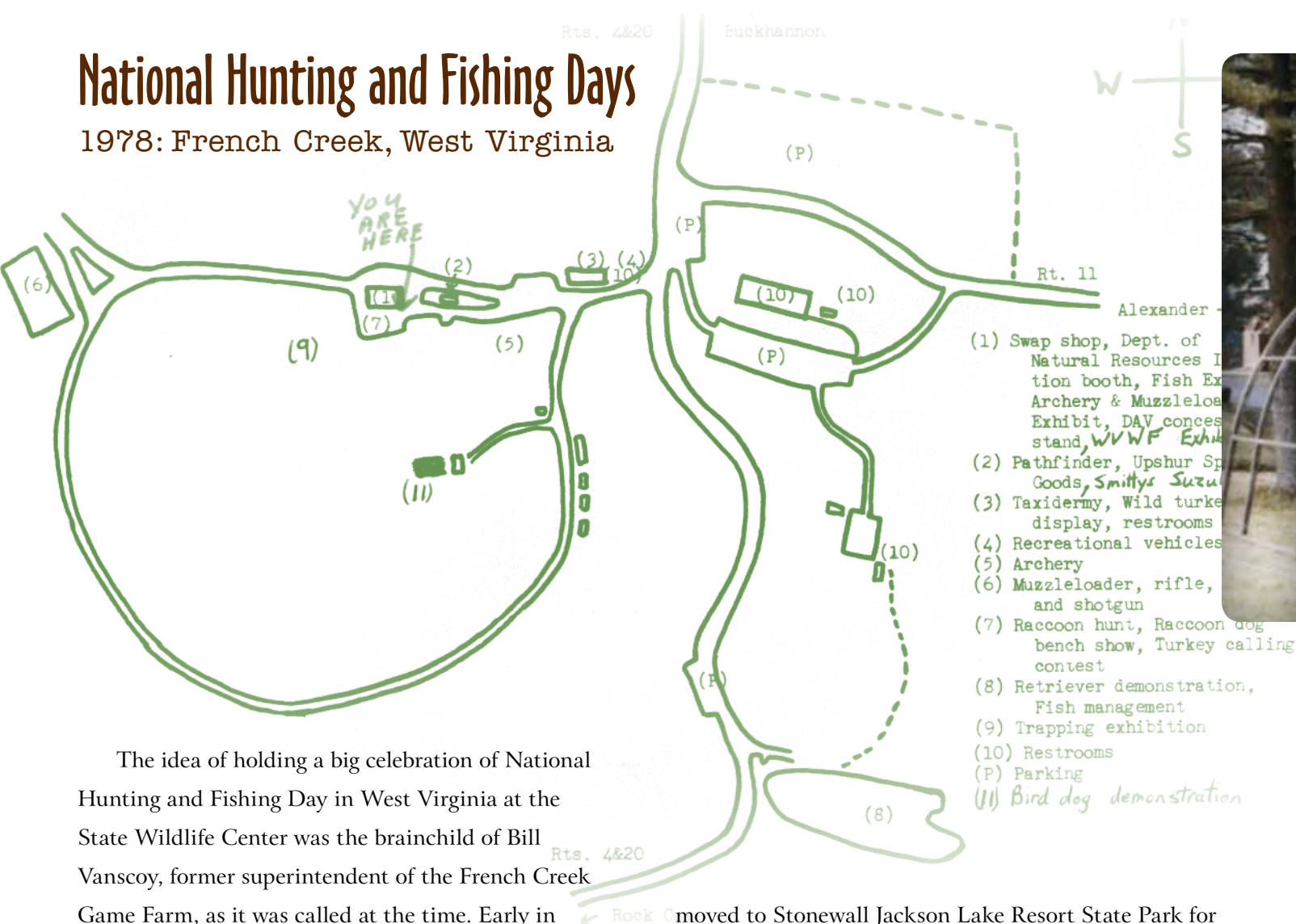
On May 2, 1972, President Richard M. Nixon signed the National Hunting and Fishing Day Bill. On the day of signing he wrote, "I urge all citizens to join with outdoor sportsmen in the wise use of our natural

resources and in insuring their proper management for the benefit of future generations." The adoption of a NH&FD Celebration soon blossomed across the country. NH&FD was quickly adopted by 50 governors and more than 600 mayors across the country. The first events were held in 1973. It is estimated that approximately 3,000 "open house" celebrations of National Hunting & Fishing Day occurred in those early years. These celebrations were held in places such as shooting ranges and suburban frog ponds. In 1975, President Gerald Ford mandated that NH&FD be held the fourth Saturday in September, and it has stayed that way ever since.

Over the years, most state celebrations of NH&FD have been refined to single large annual events. A national umbrella organization, NH&FD Program, provides a clearinghouse of information and steers the nationwide celebration. National honorary chairs of NH&FD have included President George Bush, Terry Bradshaw, Hank Williams Jr., Tom Seaver, Arnold Palmer and Jeff Foxworthy, among many others.

# National Hunting and Fishing Days

1978: French Creek, West Virginia



The idea of holding a big celebration of National Hunting and Fishing Day in West Virginia at the State Wildlife Center was the brainchild of Bill Vanscoy, former superintendent of the French Creek Game Farm, as it was called at the time. Early in 1978, he tasked Art Shomo, who operated the mobile wildlife exhibit, with organizing the event. The first DNR celebration of National Hunting and Fishing Day was held September 22-24, 1978 at the wildlife facility located 12 miles south of Buckhannon.

The event included displays of recreational vehicles, boats, and hunting, fishing and trapping equipment. Visitors could watch demonstrations of electro-fishing, turkey cannon netting, fly casting and bird dog training. Attendees could try their hand at shooting muzzleloaders, air rifles and shotguns. Contests included a raccoon hunt, raccoon dog bench show and turkey calling. In addition, wildlife movies were shown in a large tent supplied by the National Guard. More than 5,000 visitors attended that year. The celebration continued at French Creek until 1996 when it was

moved to Stonewall Jackson Lake Resort State Park for easier access and more space.

Today, West Virginia's NH&FD Celebration continues to grow in popularity. Stonewall Resort State Park is an ideal location for the event because it is located close to the state's center and is just minutes off Exit 91 of Interstate 79. West Virginia's event will likely be held at the park in the foreseeable future.

Recent headline acts and seminars continue to generate buzz about West Virginia's NH&FD Celebration. Internationally acclaimed longbow trick shooter Byron Ferguson is the event's highlight and largest draw. Byron shoots instinctually and can split a playing card in half from the side, shoot dimes out of the air, and snuff out candles with an arrow. Byron's performances always draw large crowds. Tom Bechdel has annually brought his nationally acclaimed seminar



*For West Virginia's first National Hunting and Fishing Day Celebration, army tents became a movie theater.*

on eastern coyote hunting. Other seminars and demonstrations focus on hunting safety, fishing, snakes and birds of prey.

But perhaps the greatest thing about West Virginia's National Hunting & Fishing Day Celebration is the ability for both adults and children to see wildlife skills demonstrated and to participate in outdoor skills. Popular demonstrations include the deer and squirrel field dressing and skinning – passing on the declining knowledge of these necessary techniques. The wild game and fish cooking demonstration, providing free samples of popular recipes, is always a big hit. In addition, the public can try their hand at fly fishing and learn the art of controlling bird dogs. On the shooting range, the public can try (at no additional cost) muzzleloader shooting, .22 rifle shooting,



*Retriever demonstration at the 1978 celebration.*

*DNR photos*

and clay pigeon shooting. Other shooting opportunities are available with air rifles and crossbows.

Children learning hunting and fishing techniques – and having fun doing it – makes the National Hunting & Fishing Day Celebration very special. Activities for youth include archery instruction, 3-D archery shooting and a hunting simulator with laser guns, as well as the opportunity to shoot a muzzleloader, .22 rifle, shotgun, and air rifle.

Shooting opportunities that are provided at no additional cost are closely supervised. Popular exhibits that always bring the public back include a big buck display, trophy fish display, and animal track display.

The Outdoor Youth Challenge has evolved from strictly a competition format to an outdoor skills and



*Cutting edge film technology circa 1978.*



*Bill Vanscoy demonstrates deer field dressing.*

*DNR photos*



*DNR Director Frank Jezioro and Stoney ready for action.*

knowledge event in which youth ages 6-18 can either compete in a set of activities or just participate in any of the activities offered. Any youth participating in the challenge is eligible to win prizes, including lifetime hunting and fishing licenses! The winners of the competition format receive scholarships to summer conservation camps in West Virginia.

Visitors can peruse tables of outdoor-related equipment set up by numerous vendors. They can also satisfy their appetite by visiting food booths set up by both commercial businesses and non-profit organizations.

So, why do the DNR and the West Virginia Federation co-sponsor the National Hunting and Fishing Day Celebration every year? Certainly, West Virginia's event shares the initial reason for the national celebration: to showcase the accomplishments and continued benefit hunters and anglers play in conservation. But West Virginia's Celebration is designed to generate excitement about outdoor-related activities and ultimately promote recruitment and retention for young, budding hunters, anglers and wildlife-watchers,

and for those older individuals who have temporarily abandoned these sports. With this event, the DNR hopes to help preserve West Virginia's outdoor heritage. We hope to educate the public by providing opportunities to learn the skills, safety, ethics, respect and stewardship needed for these outdoor activities. And basically, just to encourage folks to get outdoors. The Celebration also provides an outstanding outreach opportunity, allowing the public to learn about DNR's management activities and wildlife law enforcement. In addition, it provides folks an opportunity to learn how other organizations, agencies, landowners and businesses help to conserve West Virginia's wildlife and preserve our hunting and fishing heritage.

So, if you haven't checked out West Virginia's NH&FD Celebration, do yourself, and your family, a favor and come out this year to see what all the excitement is about. You'll soon understand why many West Virginians come back to the event year after year.

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