

# It's time to bring Jack back home

By Jodi Fouch

There are some memories from one's childhood that never seem to fade. I love reminiscing about the things we did as children. A lot of those memories involve trips to, and visits with, our grandma in Mount Lookout.

Way back then, a trip to Mount Lookout was a lot more complicated than it is now, and we made the trip at least a couple of times a month. There was no interstate, so we traveled through the towns of Philippi, Buckhannon and Sutton.

Going down state Route 20, about 1/2 hour south of Buckhannon was what was then known as the French Creek Game Farm. We kids loved to stop there, and we often did.

I remember they had crows that would say "hi!" and "hello!" to you as you passed their cage. It fascinated me to know that "normal" birds that you might see flying around in the wild could actually be taught to speak words. I headed for their pen as soon as we were out of the car.

There were all sorts of animals there. I specifically remember deer, which included an albino deer, buffalo, foxes, beavers and bears. I think there was a pen with peacocks, also.

Even after we grew up, it was not unusual for my brother and me to stop there on our way to Grandma's. We even took dates there for picnics on a few occasions.

After I had children, we took the boys and our niece and nephew there, and when our Fresh Air child, Chris, came for a visit, that was one of the first places we wanted him to see.

As the kids grew up and went off on their own and I-79 was built, which made it easier to get to Mount Lookout, we no longer traveled that way. Our trips to that place full of fond memories ceased. But I will tell you that the French Creek Game Farm, now called the West Virginia State Wildlife Center, is still near and dear to my heart.

This all brings me to the reason for this article which is "Jack the black bear."

Let me share with you some background on Jack, provided to me by conservation officer, Jeff Craig: "Jack was born in the early 70s at the wildlife center. He was one of three in a litter. His father was named Tobe and was believed to be from Pocahontas County. Jack fathered several cubs while at the center. When he was moved from the old pen to the current location of the bear display in July of 1986, he weighed 586 pounds. This would have been a summer weight and eight years before his death. There was never a recorded weight at his death.



**Jack the Bear**

"Danny Reed, a 30-year employee at the center, believes he exceeded the 700-pound mark at prime winter weight. He also says that Jack would get out of his pen from time-to-time and would be lured back with a bottle of pop. Jack died in August of 1994 at about 22-23 years of age. Danny also says, in joking, that he thinks Jack drank 2 million gallons of soda pop during his life." (Jack was best known to Game Farm visitors for his fondness for soda pop!)

Jack had been in a freezer since his death and in 2007, he was about to be disposed of.

Craig continues, "I thought a bear that large who gave to so many needed a little more respect than to be thrown in a trash hole."

Kathy and Stewart Hornby, of Wilderrest Inn in Grant County, hold yearly fund-raisers to benefit West Virginia wildlife and when they heard the story of Jack, from Craig, they decided to make it a project to raise the money to bring Jack "home" to the wildlife center.

All of the necessary funds to have Jack mounted and returned to the center – \$2,000 – was raised, last year, at a Wilderrest Inn beerfest.

Rick Dunlap, of Rick's Taxidermy in Buckhannon, did the mount pretty much at cost. He was assisted by Ricky Dunlap, Sam Ables and Chris Talbott. Carl Waybright, a bear hunter from Buckhannon, made and donated the wooden base for the mount. There were also numerous people who donated items to be auctioned off at the beerfest, and all those who attended had a part in the project.

The project is now completed, or at least will by April 5.

Craig says, "Due to Jack's size we had to modify a form used for a grizzly bear which cost us \$1,000 alone. Jack exceeded 700 pounds and was 82 inches long from nose to tail, so he would have stood over eight feet tall. There are no records that we can find of a West Virginia black bear being any larger, so he will be the largest native West Virginia black bear known to exist."

There will be a ceremony, April 5, at noon, for the public to see the mount and welcome Jack home. Everyone is invited and encouraged to attend. The regular wildlife center entrance fee will be in effect since the center opens officially, April 1, for the season.

I'm not going to be able to make it April 5, but will plan a trip there this summer with the grandkids. I want to show them Jack and tell them the story of how some kind folks here in Grant County took it upon themselves to make sure, that in the end, Jack got the respect he deserved. And, I want to share my memories with them and perhaps they'll make a few memories of their own.