

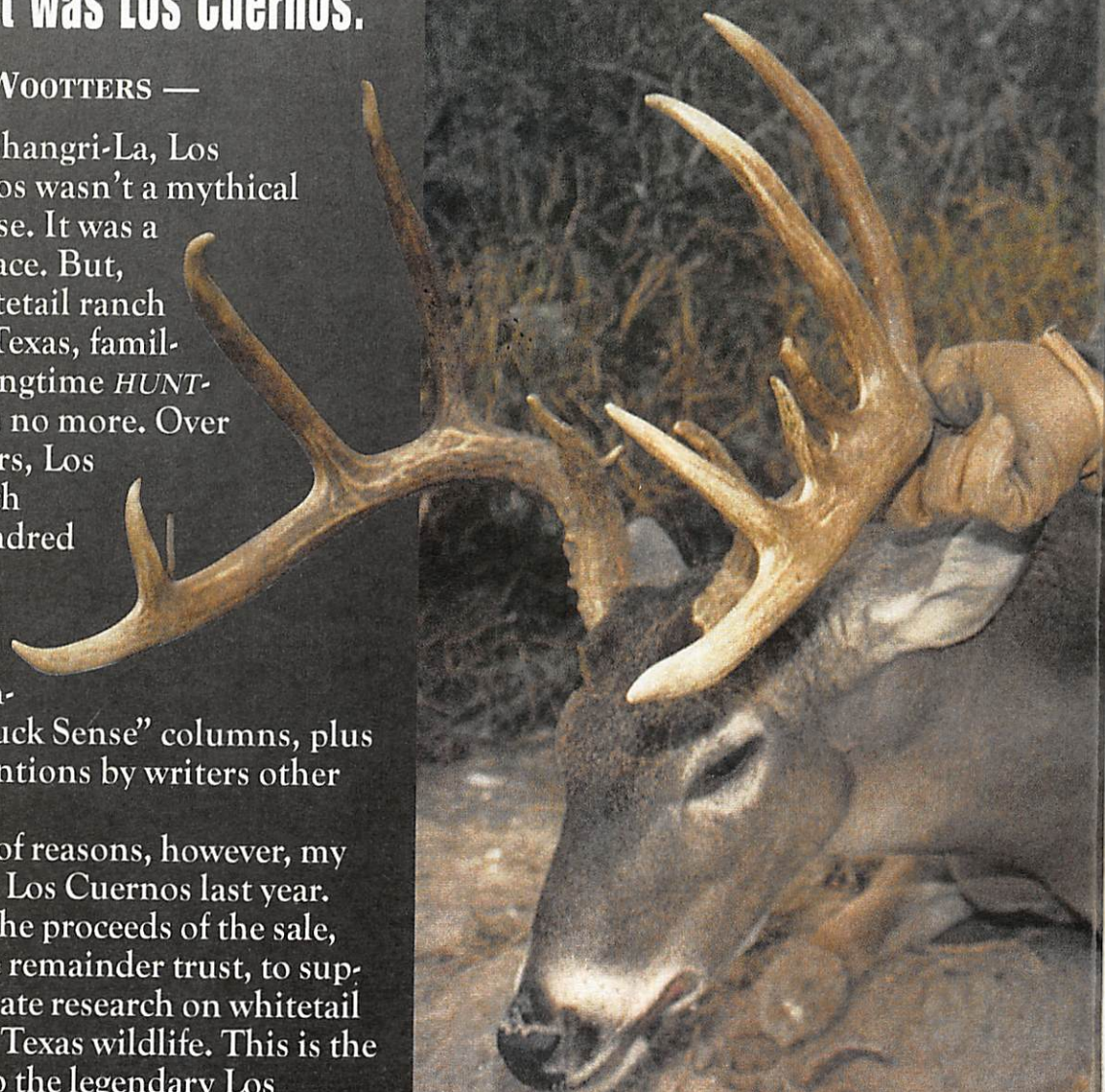
SAYONARA, SOUTH TEXAS

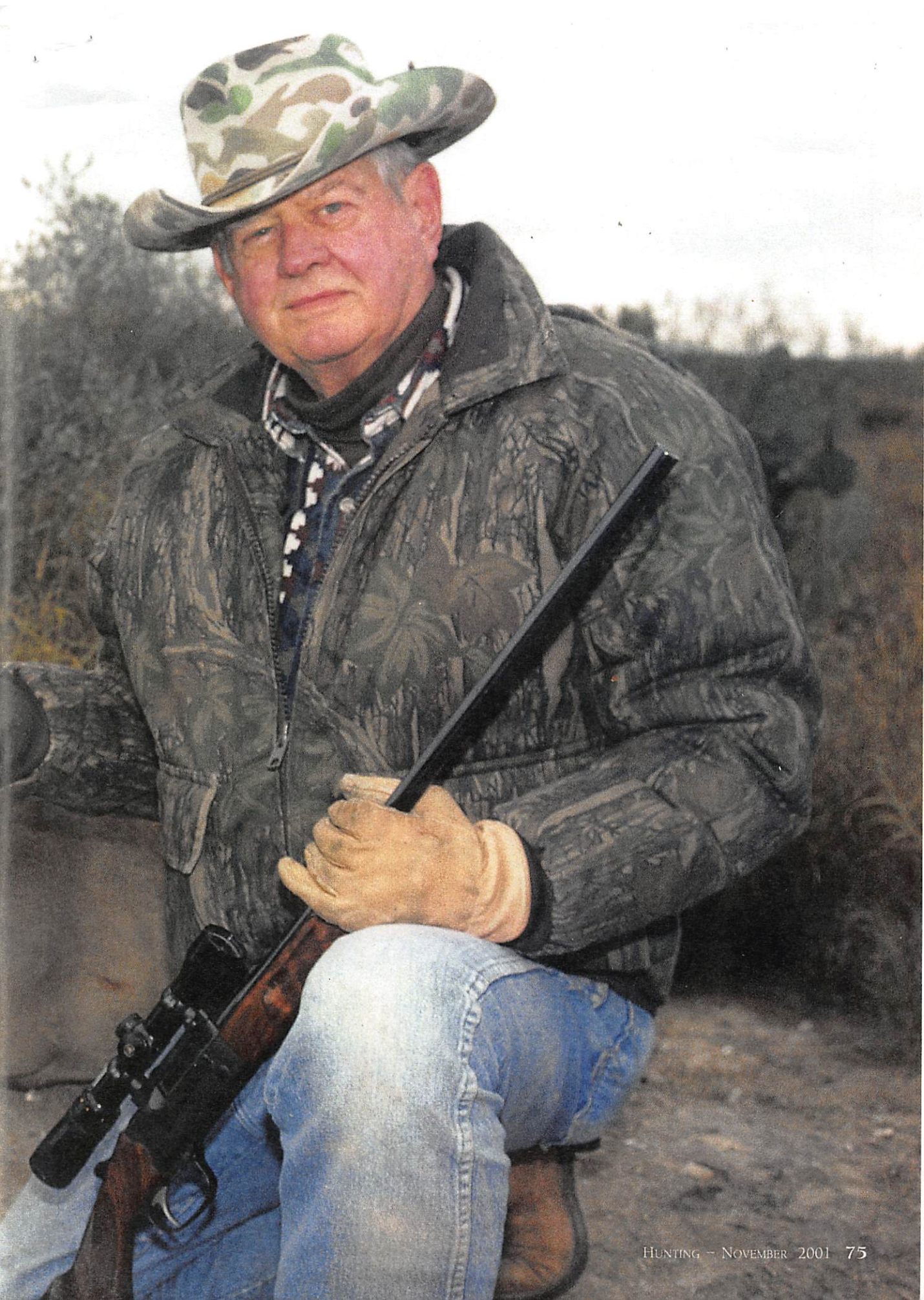
A sad farewell to the hunters' heaven that was Los Cuernos.

— BY JOHN WOOTTERS —

Unlike Shangri-La, Los Cuernos wasn't a mythical paradise. It was a real place. But, sadly, the whitetail ranch near Laredo, Texas, familiar to many longtime *HUNTING* readers, is no more. Over the last 21 years, Los Cuernos Ranch inspired a hundred deer-related features for this magazine and a hundred more "Buck Sense" columns, plus occasional mentions by writers other than myself.

For a variety of reasons, however, my wife and I sold Los Cuernos last year. We dedicated the proceeds of the sale, via a charitable remainder trust, to support postgraduate research on whitetail deer and other Texas wildlife. This is the final farewell to the legendary Los Cuernos ranch.







Jeannie's camouflaged electric golf cart was the first of its kind to be publicized and established a trend that is followed today by a dozen manufacturers.

Gary Sitton, Craig Boddington and Todd Smith have all harvested Los Cuernos bucks. Writer, whitetail authority, and TV host Larry Weishuhn visited Los Cuernos—on one occasion to fly a helicopter deer census in his role as a wildlife biologist. Writer Bill Bynum took a fine 10-pointer there—and proposed to his future bride that night at the Los Cuernos dinner table.

The greatest joy in owning such a

place is in sharing it with others. Beside the owners, 20 different hunters took whitetails on Los Cuernos. Most of our hunting guests were old and respected friends of ours who were invited because we enjoyed their company. Nobody was ever invited to Los Cuernos for business purposes or out of a sense of obligation; we never sold a hunt and we never claimed a deduction for entertaining guests.

Many Los Cuernos deer—some that

were harvested and some that weren't—have appeared in the pages of *HUNTING*. Many acquired nicknames that some readers may remember: the Gravel Hill Buck, the Alamo Buck, the Creek Monster, the One O'Clock Buck, the Wide Eight-Pointer, the Whitenose Buck.

The most famous Los Cuernos deer of all was Bucky, the free-ranging, wild and friendly buck who hung around our camphouse to mooch bananas and apples off my wife, Jeannie, and steal cigarettes—which he ate—off Joe Balickie and Bob Baer. Bucky's many adventures supplied material for several "Buck Sense" columns and one full-length feature article (February 1995). Bucky seemed to spark a lot of readers' emotions, and many still ask me about him.

My wife was proud to have taken the very best whitetail shot on Los Cuernos during our time there. She shot it in 1990 after a remarkable hunt that made a feature article in *HUNTING* (June 1991). He was a 6½-year-old, 14-pointer gross-scoring about 163 B&C. Then in 1997, Jeannie collected the heaviest-bodied buck ever at Los Cuernos, a 195-pounder (live weight).

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The so-called Brush Country of southern Texas is perhaps the best area of its size in the world for the combination of the quality and numbers of big-antlered bucks. The Boone and Crockett book lists a few notable monsters from east, central and north Texas, but the Brush Country has produced more free-ranging record heads than all the rest of the state put together. It is a mecca for both resident and nonresident trophy hunters. Roughly, its Texas limits are Interstate Highway 37, the Gulf of Mexico, the Rio Grande River and U.S. Highway 90. Needless to say, neither the Brush Country nor the quality deer genes stop at the Mexican border.

It's a tough place to hunt in more ways than one, but nothing—not cactus thorns, nor rattlesnakes, nor drug smugglers, nor the devil himself—could have kept me out of the Brush Country, and they have all tried. Being John Wootters, a native Texan, my nose pointed south in November as magnetically as a compass points north.

The toughest thing about hunting down there has always been finding a place to hunt. Most of the deer habitat is in large private ranches, making it difficult—and expensive—to locate a hunting ground. The terrain and vegetation are different from other whitetail habitats, causing even experienced

hunters to feel lost unless they hire a local guide. Leasing hunting rights is a way of life in those parts, but the trick is finding the right place to lease. Good ones don't

turn over very often, and prices were always pretty steep for a struggling outdoor writer. Even splitting the fee with buddies, I was straining to manage even a second-rate place back in the 1960s.

In 1979, a small wooded pasture in eastern Texas, which my wife and I had inherited, became expendable. This land had been in the family for 25 years, and its value had appreciated far beyond the \$15 per acre at which my father had bought it. Suddenly, visions of South Texas and mighty whitetails loomed in our daydreams. The details of the transaction that followed still confuse me and would bore you, but I finagled a three-way trade—essentially exchanging the East Texas place for twice as much land of the same aggregate value in Webb County, Texas, not far from Laredo and the Rio Grande. Suddenly, I was a Texas rancher with a 1,600-acre Brush Country spread on which I didn't owe a nickel. For a trophy deer hunter, that was literally my wildest of dreams coming true.

We renamed the property "Los Cuernos"—which aptly means "the antlers" in Spanish—and began to make it our own. We built a camp and made other improvements, both to the ranch and to its deer herd.

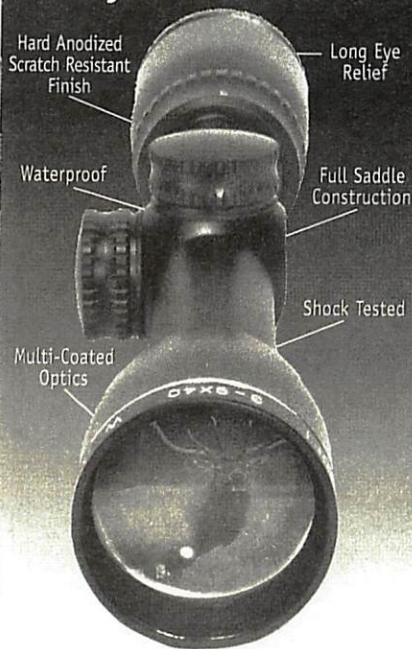
Over the years, the place became rather famous. Past *HUNTING* editors



In 1997, Jeannie Wootters collected the heaviest buck ever taken on Los Cuernos, at 195 pounds live, 156 dressed weight.

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I got my career second-best buck a few days later, a 13-point 164 (gross B&C) weighing just three pounds less. A week later, a guest named Bill Priddy harvested a 12-pointer grossing exactly 160. All three of these bucks sported between 19 and 20 inches in inside spread, and they averaged 6½ years of age. Three 160-class bucks from a low-fenced property in two weeks—that was a hell of a run.

No, none of them "booked." But please remember that these were completely free-ranging deer, taken under fair-chase rules and born, raised and hunted on a property with no game-proof fences, no automatic corn feeders and no planted food plots.

It was on this ranch that I concluded that "old equals trophy," and 5½ years became the minimum acceptable age for a shootable trophy deer. It was also here that I was forced by the loss of my master eye to become a serious pistol hunter. In three seasons (1992-94), I handgunned four consecutive bucks that averaged 7½ years of age. For me, that was a prouder personal accomplishment than any Boone and Crockett listing could ever be. One of them was the famous "double double-beam" freak head about which I wrote a "Buck Sense" column (June 1995).

Many of the most memorable Los Cuernos deer were bucks we didn't

shoot. The Wide Eight-Pointer lived a charmed life, having been missed by three of the finest game shots I know and stupidly turned down twice by me. He died of old age or as close to that as a wild deer ever reaches. The Whitenose buck was a near-record book 10-pointer that Jeannie got so enthralled with videotaping that she forgot she had a rifle with her. Then there was a young-looking 6x6 that I passed in order to see how much he'd grow the following year—and then subsequently never saw him again. Jeannie recorded about three seconds of heart-stopping video of another 12-point monster before he vanished forever into the thickets.

The most lasting contribution of Los Cuernos to whitetail knowledge may be the so-called "Los Cuernos Database." This correlated every hunting-season sighting of deer for 20 years with weather parameters: air temperature, barometric status and movement, wind direction and velocity, sky conditions, moon phase and time of day. Believe it or not, we actually recorded 13,441 individual deer sightings during this time. That was 9,104 antlerless and 4,337 antlered whitetails observed during 441 calendar days, on which 1,113 man-days of hunting were expended.

Over the two decades, that comes out to an average of 12.1 deer and 3.8 bucks per hunter-day observed, with an observed sex ratio of 1 buck to 2.5 does. We harvested 44 bucks and 32 does for a 20-year kill of 76 deer (plus



Jeannie Wootters spoils Bucky, the famous "tame, wild" whitetail that was the dominant buck around the Los Cuernos camp house for four years. Peso the poodle begs for his share.

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67 feral hogs). That means we collected only one whitetail of any sex for every 24 acres of land—over the entire 20 seasons. No wonder we had so many elderly bucks.

There's a gold mine of white-tail information buried in the data sheets of the Los Cuernos Database, just waiting to be mined. Want to know how a northwest wind, a falling barometer and a cloudy sky affect buck movements? Or the a full moon and freezing temperatures? It's all there in the database, if we can just figure out how to ask the right questions.

The Brush Country, for all its desiccated and hostile first impressions, shelters the richest variety of wildlife I know. Besides the whitetails, there are javelinas, feral hogs, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, badgers, rabbits and quail in abundant numbers.

The place was also paradise for a birder like me. A springtime visitor in the early years added 15 species to his life list on the first day, including green jay, great kiskadee, tropical kingbird, groove-billed ani, Audubon's oriole,

white-tipped dove, curve-billed thrasher, Harris' hawk and golden-fronted woodpecker. Over the years, the Los Cuernos bird checklist grew to 150

23 species of reptiles and amphibians—including some rare and threatened life forms such as the reticulated collared lizard and Texas gopher tortoise.

The most important geographical feature of the ranch is San Juanito creek, which is the major drainage for that area. Not only was the lush creek bottom a magnet for whitetails and other wildlife in the dry land, but it obviously had been just as big an attraction for thousands of years, as it was lined with archaeological sites and treasures. We owned four miles of San Juanito, from which we recovered hundreds of exquisite flint spear and arrow points, scrapers, gouges, knives and miscellaneous objects dating back at least 8,000 years.

Before the devastating 1984 South Texas drought, the ranch was also a fisherman's playground; some of Los Cuernos' stock watering ponds were plentiful with bass, crappie and catfish. One spring afternoon a neighbor caught three largemouths from one of our waterholes, and they collectively



Los Cuernos was also a birders' paradise, as illustrated by this pair of rarities—an Audubon's oriole and golden-fronted woodpecker—sharing a bath in the camp house yard.

species, of which my favorite "firsts" were the varied hunting, black-shoulder kite, hooded oriole, black-bellied whistling duck and olive sparrow.

My Los Cuernos checklist of trees and shrubs reached 46 species, including 12 different kinds of cactus. Forty-nine different kinds of wildflowers, forbs and vines were identified. I found

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weighed about 25 pounds.

Those same ponds were often black with ducks in wintertime, and occasionally with geese and even sandhill cranes. There was usually good—sometimes great—shooting on doves around them, and there was almost always a covey or two of quail nearby.

So how could we give up all this and sell the land? The best answer is simply that the time was right. Now that Jeannie and I are in our 70s, the 240-mile trip to the ranch seems longer than it did a few years back.

Then there were the beehives behind the camp-house chimney—gentle European honeybees at first, then gradually hybridizing with the Africanized “killer bees” until they were all killers. No matter what we did, or how many we exterminated, they always came back. Jeannie is allergic to insect venom; one wrong move could have been fatal to her.

The other unstoppable invasion from the south was even more disturbing. It was the human avalanche of illegal immigrants and drug runners developing after the U.S. government lost control of its borders. Los Cuernos was inside that 20-mile-wide strip along the Rio Grande that the border patrolmen call No Man's Land—where the illegal immigration wars are fought. Eventually, it reached the point where our camp house was broken into and vandalized


and our possessions stolen every time we turned our backs.

I had always gone armed when at Los Cuernos, even when not hunting, but somehow a revolver now seemed inadequate as we began seeing groups of 15 or 20 illegals roaming our land. And they were not always the peaceful fellows only coming to the U.S. to seek honest work so they can feed their families—some of these immigrants were simply thugs, dregs from the Mexican city streets, and they were dangerous. I finally had to insist that Jeannie carry a pistol anytime she left the house alone.

All in all, Los Cuernos simply stopped being as much fun as it was a decade earlier. We found ourselves going to the ranch less and less often, for shorter stays, and never alone.

Everything changes in this world. Paradises are lost every day. What once seemed idyllic can become intolerable. Los Cuernos was no longer the place it had been. It is sad, but it happens. We found an eager buyer who I believe will take care of the land and the deer, and our Los Cuernos Ranch now exists only in our memories.

Now that land and that concept will fund wildlife research scholarships long after Jeannie and I are no longer here. I like to think about that, instead of the changes for the worse over which we had no control, which gradually took over Los Cuernos.

But it does feel very odd indeed, for the first time in the 50 years we've been married, to have no place to hunt deer this season. 



Wootters congratulates former HUNTING editor Todd Smith on his fine Los Cuernos 10-pointer.