

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Shannon Tompkins

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:03] Mr. Tompkins?

Shannon Tompkins [00:00:04] Mr. Todd. How are you?

David Todd [00:00:09] I'm fine, fine. You're so kind to call. Thank you very much.

Shannon Tompkins [00:00:14] Oh, no. I am honored by the opportunity. Thank you.

David Todd [00:00:21] Well, I look forward to learning a lot from you. And I really appreciate your time, you said you might be able to spare. So thank you very much.

Shannon Tompkins [00:00:31] Sure. Sure. Well, how's your day going?

David Todd [00:00:36] Well, it's fine. This is a highlight. So I'm, I'm excited.

Shannon Tompkins [00:00:41] Great.

David Todd [00:00:42] And I imagine that you've done this so many times, maybe sitting on the other side of the desk, or the other side of the phone line. But I was hoping I could maybe just lay out a little preamble here of what we're planning to do and, you know, the method. And so if you could bear with me.

Shannon Tompkins [00:01:05] Certainly.

David Todd [00:01:05] Just recite, what's a little bit of a little outline I guess of what we might be doing.

David Todd [00:01:16] So the thought is that with your approval, we are planning to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. And.

Shannon Tompkins [00:01:46] Kevin, our plans that you read.

David Todd [00:01:49] Well, good. And I wanted to assure you that you would have all rights to use this recording for whatever purposes you'd like. And I wanted to make sure that's just okay with you before we went any further.

Shannon Tompkins [00:02:02] Certainly it is. You know, I have absolutely no problem with that. Honored to be a part of this.

David Todd [00:02:09] Well, great. Well, thank you so much. So let me just lay out some of the when and the what and the where, and just to give you a context to our conversation here. It is June 15th, 2020. My name is David Todd, and we are conducting an interview with Shannon Tompkins, who was a longtime outdoor columnist for the Houston Chronicle and the Beaumont Enterprise. And in those positions covered wildlife and fisheries issues, research, laws and regulations and other related topics. And today, we'll be focusing on some of the changes that he saw and reported on in squirrel hunting in Texas, and I guess small game hunting more generally, and what those changes might mean more broadly.

David Todd [00:03:13] So maybe we can launch and pose a couple of questions and see what you think.

Shannon Tompkins [00:03:21] Sure.

David Todd [00:03:22] I, I usually like to sort these with just a kind of introductory questions about what's your background and your interest in wildlife and the outdoors might be. How you, how you got started?

Shannon Tompkins [00:03:39] Well, I guess you could probably say I was I guess I was born into it. My, you know, my family's been in Texas for a long time and I was born into a family of folks who were really close to the land and, you know, just grew up, grew up, spending a lot of time with my father and my grandfathers and other folks outside, and by myself, quite a bit too. I was lucky enough to grow up in a time and a place where, you know, I was kind of a free-range kid and just had a million different opportunities to spend time outside and just somehow connected with it. So, you know, I just felt that was what was important to me.

Shannon Tompkins [00:04:36] Are you looking for some information on my background or where, where I was born, where I came from, how I ended up where I ended up?

David Todd [00:04:46] Well, you know there's so many aspects to your life, but I guess the key thing here is, is just how you came to have so much expertise and interest and experience in hunting, fishing, wildlife, you know, outdoor experiences. And so what you told me so far is great. And if you just wanted to add anything to it, that's good, too.

Shannon Tompkins [00:05:10] Sure. It's just, you know, I was born into a family that was been in east Texas for, you know, literally 200 years now, and in the same area, basically, my paternal side of the family in east Texas, you know.

Shannon Tompkins [00:05:31] Just like kids back then or families back then, I was lucky to grow up in and around an extended family and still lucky enough to have that too. My mom's 90 years old and I talk with her almost every day. And, but we, and she was a heck of a squirrel hunter as a man in her younger days. So, you know, I just grew up in a family who spent a lot of time hunting and fishing and it was just a part of my life, and an important part of my life. It was like socially, culturally, familial. And I just somehow connected with it. And so it just, you know, through my life, I never really figured I would end up doing what I ended up doing as a career for almost 40 years. I spent almost 40 years in newspapers, well 40 years. But, you know, it just, it was just one of those things that, I guess I was just like I said, I guess I

was just born into it. And I just always had a fascination for nature and wildlife. I mean, you know, most kids, a lot of kids, I guess, that had my opportunities, we spent a lot of time by ourselves in the woods and, you know, laying on our belly, in the grass, watching ants. And all that just somehow connected with me. And I was always interested in it. Fascinated with it.

Shannon Tompkins [00:07:12] And I ended up having the opportunity to focus on it when I ended up getting with newspapers and eventually, by a roundabout way, ended up covering outdoor recreation and natural resource issues. And that led me to, you know, a lot of opportunities I would not have already otherwise had. But I got to spend a lot of time with a lot of really smart, insightful folks. Just through their patience and kindness and openness, share things with me, just I learned tons from other people.

David Todd [00:08:00] Many teachers. .

Shannon Tompkins [00:08:02] Many, many, many teachers. And you know, primary ones to begin with were, you know, my family. I spent a lot of time, a lot of time in the woods. My family has, paternal side of the family, has a place in Polk County. And I spent a lot of time there along Menard Creek, the upper end of the Menard Creek in the woods with my father and grandfather and great uncles and second cousins and the grandmother and mother and brothers. And, you know, I just, it was just one of those places where you feel... you know, kids are always looking for a place to fit in. And, and particularly once you get to be a teenager, you're looking for a place to fit in. And I always felt I fit in more in the woods or on the water or places like that. I feel competent there. You know, that's your, you know, your comfort place. And that's, you know, that's just what happened to me.

Shannon Tompkins [00:09:25] Are you looking for kind of information on my career or anything like that?

David Todd [00:09:32] Well, I think that most of these interviews are more about impressions and, than facts and figures, dates, names. And, and this is all very useful. You know, I and I, I think that it might be good to just talk a little bit about the context of what we're talking about, maybe some of the background. And that's that, from, I guess, 1983 to 2003, to just cite one statistic, the number of squirrel hunters in Texas dropped by two thirds. And I think that the decline has stretched before 1983 and it's continued since 2003. And I'm curious if you know, we could spend the balance of the time we have.

Shannon Tompkins [00:10:33] Sure.

David Todd [00:10:34] From your standpoint of being both interested in wildlife and the outdoors, and also a journalist, what you can tell us about squirrel hunting, what it involves, and then also why this decline might have come about and what it might mean. And I thought to start maybe if you could talk about how squirrels are hunted in the first place, you know, that might be a place to begin.

Shannon Tompkins [00:11:00] Sure. Well, you know, try to go back to, oh, you know, to east, Texas. In Texas, squirrels, you know, we have two main squirrel species, gray and fox squirrels. And almost all of those are concentrated in the eastern third of the state. So you had an Eastern, you have a population of folks who came into east Texas, the Anglo population, that came into east Texas, most of them came from, most of them came from Tennessee, Alabama, places like that, where they had already hunted squirrels. East Texas has, had

tremendous forest, tremendously diverse forest. So we had a ton of squirrel habitat. We just had, East Texas was just alive with squirrels.

Shannon Tompkins [00:11:58] That changed over that over the years, you know, as the landscape changed. And as I know you're aware of, you know, by the early, the late eighteen hundreds, early nineteen hundreds, East Texas, the landscape has changed quickly. The population then was a lot of, a lot of folks hunted. They concentrated on what was available. Squirrel, squirrel hunting was a way to get, way to get something to eat. And so you just have a world of, of forest out there, so people would squirrel hunt.

Shannon Tompkins [00:12:52] The basic squirrel hunting, well, there's two or three ways you can do it. Still hunting, which is basically just slowly moving through the woods, moving as quietly as you can, from spot to spot, tree to tree, maybe 30 yards at a time, stop, sit up against the tree, watch, until you see some movement of squirrels in a tree and then try to maneuver yourself around for a shot. And the two, you know, most people in east Texas either, almost all of them hunted with a shotgun or with a .22 rifle. So now you're moving through the woods, slowly, and, and watching all, all the time. Watch, listen until you see a squirrel, then you try to take that squirrel.

Shannon Tompkins [00:13:58] The other one is just more finding spots in the woods, we used to call them den trees. Usually big oaks or hickory trees, but usually big oaks, and you would take a position base of the tree within range of there and sit there and just wait, and hope that the squirrels move close.

Shannon Tompkins [00:14:27] The last way is with a squirrel dog, which were really, really common when I was growing up and spent a lot of time hunting Polk County, and in East Texas in general. Usually a feist, a cur; we used mostly fox terriers or rat terriers, small dogs. The dog would cast in front of you, move slowly through the woods and just sort of follow along. The dog with either see or smell a squirrel, pursue that squirrel, run it up a tree, then start barking and that that's the signal that go over where the dog was, the dog is up against the tree and start trying to find the squirrel, which is quite a challenge depending on the time of year and the terrain. You'd be amazed at how a squirrel can hide in a tree.

Shannon Tompkins [00:15:27] And there is still squirrel dogs, folks still use squirrel dogs in east Texas. I have a great friend, Tom Gallenback, back up in Panola County, has a tremendous squirrel dog and, and enjoyed hunting with him days earlier this year.

Shannon Tompkins [00:15:48] But what happened was. Early 1900s, East Texas basically lost all of its deer. So and it was quickly losing its turkeys. Faced with all that, most of our deer in east Texas were gone by the early '20s and '30s, and turkeys died by the '30s, certainly the '40s. So the only thing that was left that was really abundant then was was the squirrel. So that's what everybody concentrated on. And it was a, almost, almost a cultural, societal deal. Everybody's for it. You still had quite a bit of squirrel habitat in Texas, in the early, you know, early half of the 20th century. And so that's what everybody concentrated on. So you had, you had, if you hunted in east Texas, you hunted squirrels, occasionally you could hunt quail, we still had a fair number of quail in east Texas because East Texas still had a lot of small farms. We had a lot of a fair amount of quail habitat.

Shannon Tompkins [00:17:06] But that changed over the over the 20th century with the coming of, coming of really commercial timber production. Timber companies owned tremendous amounts of land in east Texas, still do, and most of the land was, was open.

Anyone could hunt it, for no fee. There was no, no, no real lease system back then. So there were a lot of opportunities and a lot of squirrels. That changed as the 20th century progressed. And you saw just incredible landscape changes in east Texas. Switching from, which mixed forest to pine monoculture commercial timber, which reduced the habitat of these animals, the squirrel.

Shannon Tompkins [00:18:18] And you also had this incredible surge in reservoir construction in the '50s and '60s, and that that just consumed a lot of squirrel habitat. Gary Spencer, who was the Parks and Wildlife biologist that was posted in Jasper, I can remember visiting with him about squirrels a lot back in the late '70s through the '80s, and Gary had a great line. We talked about how squirrels were declining in east Texas. And why is that? And we said, well, squirrels can't live on a on a diet of solid pine seeds and they can't tread water forever. And I thought that was pretty insightful.

Shannon Tompkins [00:19:21] So if you have, at the same time you've seen the landscape change in East Texas, and the society changed, too. You know, the end of small farms. Kind of a disconnect between people and the land. The conversions to commercial timber operations created a really good opportunity for whitetail deer to come back. As whitetail deer numbers came back, interest in hunting them came back. So you had, we have, now you have competition for hunters' time and money. The timber companies also know that, hey, people will pay for lease rights for profit. So you ended up with what had been previously just completely open land, that anyone could hunt, now being closed off. So we had change in opportunities.

Shannon Tompkins [00:20:31] And at the same time, squirrel habitat's diminishing. You know, deer habitat's coming on. Yeah, and you had other things too. Feral hogs! Which you know, were relatively rare in east Texas, really, until the late '80s. Feral hogs compete directly with squirrels, believe it or not, mostly for mast. So you have squirrels have been given increased competition from, from feral hogs. And then the dog deer hunters went up. Then the numbers of squirrel hunters in Texas in the late '70s, early '80s - quarter million people, or more. You had a maybe, not even a third of that focused on deer hunting. And that just turned upside down for 19, basically, the '80s through the end of the 20th century. Well, by 2000, early 2000s, you had, you know squirrel hunter numbers had dropped there.

Shannon Tompkins [00:22:04] Right. Here's an interesting point, Parks and Wildlife, Texas Parks and Wildlife, who, that manages our wildlife, they quit doing squirrel population surveys in the 1970s, and you have to think back on this. By statute in Texas, there are only, I think, seven game animals, squirrels, fox squirrels and cat squirrels are two of those. The numbers and the interest of squirrel hunting was going down so quickly that Texas Parks and Wildlife just quit doing squirrel population surveys in the '70s, and they took squirrels off the small game harvest survey in the '90s, 30 years ago. So they really don't even track squirrel hunter numbers any more. They do track deer hunters and everything else. But basically, they've given up on squirrels. They don't manage them, they don't, you know, they provide some public hunting opportunities at some of the, you know, some of their WMAs. But squirrels are not a priority anymore. So we switch from them being the primary game animal in east Texas for a century, to now been relegated to almost a second thought, if anything.

Shannon Tompkins [00:23:46] Does that help? Is the kind of information that you're looking for?

David Todd [00:23:49] Yes. This is fascinating. I'm just really scribbling away, trying to follow all the things you're bringing up. And one thing that I think might be worth going to a bit more depth, since a lot of us may not be as familiar with it as you, is, is what the change in habitat, particularly bottomland habitat, hardwood habitat, might mean for squirrels, you know, especially for cat squirrels.

Shannon Tompkins [00:24:22] Right.

David Todd [00:24:24] With reservoirs and pine culture.

Shannon Tompkins [00:24:30] Well, you know, there's, you get back into the history of squirrels in east Texas and there used to be a ton of focus on it by game managers. Parks and Wildlife had a couple of them, just the most incredible, incredibly insightful biologists they ever had. One was a fellow was Phil Goodrum, and then Dan Lay. And I'm sure that you may have heard of both of these men, but there was incredible amounts of research done on squirrels beginning in the 1930s and showing, you know, populations, what, what type of woods they needed, what type of range or habitat they needed. And, you know, and averages of, of populations per, you know, per acre. And it's interesting to look at some of the stuff from Phil Goodrum and Dan Lay from back in the '30s. I looked up some old stuff from, from Mr. Goodrum, who I was lucky enough to meet later in his life. They, a squirrel eats about two pounds of food a week about, according to Phil, and back then his research showed that about 60 percent of their food were acorns. Now that's predicated on, you know, acorns being available, but if acorns were available, they were about 60 percent of their food. Phil Goodrum found no pine seeds in any squirrel's digestive tract in the 1930s - zero - everything else, there was sweet gum, and other things like that. But there were no pines. So it just tells you how important hardwoods, particularly mast-producing hardwoods, and soft mast, as well as, as, as hard mast is important to squirrels. You know, we saw just tremendous transformation of forest from, you know, oh, oak forest to or mixed pine / oak, to, you know, to softwood pine production. And so, of course, you've lost, you lost, you know, untold amounts of habitat to squirrels over the, over, over the 20th century. And so now they're still, now they're basically confined to the areas that, you know, bottomland hardwoods where you can't really grow pine, and the ones that haven't and that or you haven't had those hardwoods logged. So you just had shrinking habitat. And I can't give you a figure on percentages or anything like that. But it's, it's, you know, they're a...

Shannon Tompkins [00:27:52] You saw what happened to quail in east Texas. I mean, there when I was a kid, there were half a dozen coveys on the 300 acres of property my family controlled in Polk County. And we would you know, around Thanksgiving, we would always go try to shoot quail. There's not a quail, I doubt there's a wild quail in Polk County. So, kind of, the same thing happening with squirrels, except there is still, there are still pockets of habitat and still, and where you have those pockets of habitat, you have really good squirrel populations when conditions are right. And squirrels are, squirrels are, squirrel populations are tied almost directly to mast production, you have a good year for mast production particularly, oak acorns, you're going to have a, you know, that's going to be followed by a boom in the squirrel population.

Shannon Tompkins [00:28:59] You have, you have, you know, failures of mast crops, like we saw in the, in the droughts of the, the 2011, 2000 drought where you, you saw just tremendous drops in squirrel numbers because of mast production and loss of trees. It's just a combination of factors working against these animals. Is that of any interest?

David Todd [00:29:32] Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. This is really interesting and right on target, too. So thank you.

Shannon Tompkins [00:29:38] Yeah, it's. It's. Yeah, it's, and a lot of people like I said, a lot of people don't realize that you know, the, mast, including soft mast, is so important to squirrels? Well, a deer population, deer population cannot compete with squirrels for mast. But one of the things that really competes with is feral hogs. Most people really don't even give it consideration. So as you've seen, the feral hog population just, just exploded. You know, squirrels are one part of the collateral, the considerable collateral damage, that feral hogs have done for wildlife, not just in east Texas, but across Texas, across, across huge swaths of the U.S. and.

Shannon Tompkins [00:30:42] Go ahead.

David Todd [00:30:44] No, I was just going to ask of this this interaction between the feral hogs and squirrels is really intriguing. And I'm curious why you think hog population grew so quickly after the '80s.

Shannon Tompkins [00:31:00] Well, there are two or three factors at work there, according to folks like I've had the pleasure of doing a lot of time with folks on feral hogs. It's a really great thing. Billy Higginbotham is one of them, but several. And it seems that, what's happened, you know, to spread the feral hog population was a couple of things. One is, as deer hunting became really, really popular in east Texas. You know, in 1978, there were 92,000 deer hunters in Houston, Texas. And there's, there's 240,000 squirrel hunters. That's, they switched places. What's happened with deer hunters? Everybody puts out corn feeders, and they build food plots. So these feral hogs have, and a lot of these guys run their feeders much of the year. Feral hogs have a ton of free food. So you've got a, you got a kind of an auxiliary nutrition source for them.

Shannon Tompkins [00:32:49] Also, people began ... feral hogs are fun to hunt. They're great to eat. People started moving feral hogs around, releasing feral hogs, hauling, trapping, live-trapping and then hauling and releasing feral hogs. So you have feral hogs spreading by you know, human transmission all across the state.

Shannon Tompkins [00:33:12] At the same time, and this one applies to squirrel hunter numbers, as the land got leased up in east Texas, that land, the focus was on deer hunting. That shut out squirrel hunters. Deer hunters don't want squirrel hunters in their woods, at the same time they're out there.

Shannon Tompkins [00:33:37] Also, even if there, the lease did allow squirrel hunting. a lot of hunting leases in Texas now are, an amazing number really, are "no kids allowed". In other words, when you get on a lease, that's for your one gun. And a lot of places don't allow guests, don't allow family. Many, many do. But so now young hunters are cut out of the opportunity to learn basic hunting skills, to go squirrel hunting at all, or to learn real hunting skills. Because squirrel hunting is really hunting. It's not sitting in a box stand over a corn feeder. You actually have to get out, move, read the landscape, know the animal. Know, know, be aware. You really have to know a lot to squirrel hunt. A good squirrel hunter is a good squirreler, is a good hunter. If you're, if you're a good squirrel hunter and a good shot with a .22 on squirrels, you can, you can hunt anything in the world because you know the basics. So, anyway, you get back to these leases, these kids don't have any, young people don't have any entree into small game. They don't build up like we did when I was young. You start out with squirrels and

rabbits. And then as your, as your, as your skills, you build your skills, you move up to larger and diversified game. That opportunity's not there in a lot of cases anymore. Does that make sense?

David Todd [00:35:33] Yeah, it does. It does. It's interesting, isn't it, that both what you say about, you know, stand hunting with a deer feeder, and how different that is from stalking through the woods where, you know, you need skills to navigate and understand what you're seeing and doing.

Shannon Tompkins [00:35:55] Right. Right.

Shannon Tompkins [00:35:57] But like you say, you know, I you know you're aware, you know, the tremendous explosion of feral hog numbers in Texas. A lot of that's driven by, you know, a lot of that's, it's all been driven by human interference. Or, you know, we have we, it was only just a few years ago that finally the Texas Animal Health Commission put a stop to too, you know, transferring and releasing feral hogs across the state. Of course, you know, the genie was out of the bottle.

Shannon Tompkins [00:36:41] And it still goes on. I mean, there are still, you know, there are still people trapping and hauling and releasing for feral hogs across, across Texas. It's it's become such a big business now that, you know, when you, when something valuable, people are going to find a way to try to maintain it, whether it's economically valuable.

Shannon Tompkins [00:37:11] And that's the other thing about squirrel hunting has, there's not, squirrel hunting's pretty basic. There's not a there's not a lot of, not a lot of equipment you need to squirrel hunt. So there is not an economic incentive to push it.

Shannon Tompkins [00:37:37] I had a friend, a great friend, named Alan Allen from Allentown up by Lufkin. We had similar backgrounds. Alan actually worked for was a lobbyist for wildlife conservation.

David Todd [00:37:58] Oh, for SCOT?

Shannon Tompkins [00:37:58] For SCOT, back in the, back in the '70s and through the '80s. And Alan and I were great friends, and we both, sitting around squirrel hunting more than once. We said, "You know, both of us, what we need to do is become squirrel hunting guides because we'd never have to work, because nobody would ever hire us, because nobody is really interested in actually getting out squirrel hunting any more, everybody wants to deer hunt."

David Todd [00:38:29] You know, you said something in passing there that caught my attention. And that's that there's not a lot of treasure, I guess, in squirrel hunting. But.

Shannon Tompkins [00:38:42] Right.

David Todd [00:38:42] But there's a lot of interest in money in hog hunting. But also, I think you made, said and tried to say that there was in deer hunting as well. And I'm curious if you think that the rise of trophy hunting versus, you know, squirrel hunting which, I guess, is really just putting something in your skillet, might be a factor here.

Shannon Tompkins [00:39:10] Oh, yeah. I think, you know, one of the things I saw through my career was, and that frustrated me, to be more than frustrated, was this focus on trophy deer, and you know, the whole, it was fed by by outdoor writers, it was fed by television, and it was fed by magazines, focusing on that. And as you know, as, as wildlife managers figured out that they could produce, artificially produce heavy-antlered deer, it became very, very valuable. And. That became the focus. It became, to me, it always seemed, it became, kind of perverted, perverted. It became more about the antlers than the experience, or more about the antlers than the animal or about the landscape or the whole, the whole, you know, the whole package of what honest hunting is. And the, the, the benefits, the values of that of. Yes. I watched, you know, as we all did, you know how deer hunting changed in Texas over the past 50 years. It's a, you know, there are a lot of people out there who are a lot of deer hunters out there who's never hunted anything. And that concept of deer hunting, of hunting is, you know, to some of them is climbing into and driving a four-wheeler to box stand, and sitting in front of a feeder.

Shannon Tompkins [00:41:36] And that's reflected in, nobody, in small game hunting - rabbits, squirrels - being the primary too. I mean, I know you've seen the numbers, too. You know, they're plummeting. Just, you know. 19, I I looked up from stuff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's, you know, surveys on outdoor recreation, hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing: in 1991, 7.6 million small-game hunters in the U.S. 2016: 3.45. So, it's dropped by more than half. A lot of that's lack of opportunity, a lot of it's lack of interest, and a break in the connection. You'd have people who had, I hunted squirrels because my father hunted squirrels and his father hunted squirrels and his father hunted squirrels. And I learned from them and they passed that along to me. That does not happen any more. You have lost connection. Hey, I was lucky. I was probably the last generation that had direct ties to the land and in a, in a large scenario where, you know, everybody in my high school, most of them had grandparents who either lived on a farm or lived in rural areas, we lived in rural areas. That doesn't happen any more, so there's not that opportunity to. You're not, you're not exposed and you're exposed to it.

David Todd [00:43:04] You know, speaking of that.

Shannon Tompkins [00:43:04] I was going to say, most people, you ask people about squirrels, well, you know, they've seen them in parks. They have absolutely no idea what a wild squirrel is. And that ... I'll tell you an experience I had that, that kind of shows just how deeply that goes. I was, I was at a, had a Legislative hearing in the capital. This was 10, over 10 years ago. Well, probably 15 years ago. The hearing petered out, and of course, I don't even remember what the bill was, but I was sitting in there and of course, you know, the floor session had had gone over, so the hearing was delayed. So we're sitting in there and there's a bunch of Parks and Wildlife folks who were in there too. And a couple of guys I know who were in the wildlife division - biologists, couple of them with a lot of history in East Texas, that were sitting in the back there we're. we're talking. And it was during the session, and this was right before May 1st. May squirrel season in East Texas opens, May 1st, have a spring spring season as well as a fall season. And we were discussing, you know, you know, I'd rather be in places that we'd rather be than here. And a couple of them are saying, yeah, you know, I'd love to be, I know a bottom up in, you know, up on the Neches, I'd like to be in right now hunting squirrels. And a, an unnamed very, very high ranking staffer for Parks and Wildlife walked up as we were talking. And he said, "Squirrels? Do people hunt squirrels?" This is a wildlife division guy. He grew up, he was born in central Texas. He spent his entire life focused on, entire, professional career, focused mostly on whitetail deer. He, he had no idea people still hunted squirrel. And I thought, this is somebody who's making decisions on, you know, game

and wildlife in Texas and, and is completely clueless about a huge swath of the state, and one of the two of the seven, you know, statutorily designated game animals of the state. So.

David Todd [00:46:22] You talked about this this connection that people had to squirrel hunting and that, you know, some of it was through your parents, grandparents. I was curious if you could talk a little bit about squirrel hunting camps. I mean, I've heard that in some parts of East Texas, there were literally scores, maybe hundreds of them scattered through the forest.

Shannon Tompkins [00:46:49] Certainly that one, oh, that goes back to when, so much of east Texas was still, so many huge tracts or owned by, you know, forest, they call them forest product companies now, but timber companies, that were open, and they could restrict anybody from using them. Yeah, there were, you know, when I was young, families, extended families and friends, who would, you know, they would repair to the bottoms around the 1st of October, set up, you know, camps, tents, little shanties, you know, and basically live there for, you know, it's almost always somebody there. But on the weekends, there would be lots of people, but you would have squirrel camp. Everybody's, you know, camped there, squirrel hunt doing the day, clean squirrels in the afternoon, cook squirrels at night. And it was, it was, it was kind of a hunting version of brush arbor preaching camps. You know what I mean? Camps, you know, we used to have those when I was young, you know, it would be week-long religious gathering in what they call brush arbors, which were basically big sheds set up in the woods somewhere. And every night for you know, a week there'd be a preaching and sinning. This was sort of a squirrel-hunting version of that.

Shannon Tompkins [00:48:41] And I was lucky enough to go to one of them to spend some time with one of the last ones, up in, up near, up near Carthage just a few years ago. And as a matter of fact, I think Phillip Meyer wrote a piece on that, on that squirrel camp in, for Texas Monthly a few years ago, too, I don't know how he ended up finding out about it, but yeah, there were, there were squirrel camps throughout east Texas and that just faded as access to tracts, large tracts of land became restricted. But, yes, squirrel camps - yes, I had relatives, who would be, participate in that. And we would go on the weekends, go spend time with that, squirrel hunt all day and all eat squirrels all night. But yeah, I think that that one camp up there near Panola, up near Carthage, Panola County. I'm not even sure if it's still a, it's still a going concern.

David Todd [00:49:58] Well, I think you mentioned that one of the reasons for the decline in these hunting camps, maybe for squirrel hunting in general is the fall in access to, to land where you can hunt. And I am curious if you could talk a little bit about whether the passage of stock laws and the passage of limits on using dogs to hunt deer might have had a role in that change in access.

Shannon Tompkins [00:50:26] Well, you know, you know stock laws really changed in the '50s and your open range ended. I don't know if that had as big an effect as the, as the switch to leasing or, you know, and by small groups of people. And, there are still places that offer opportunities for squirrel hunters and parts of the national forest, although much of the national forests are fairly skimpy squirrel populations mainly, and a lot of fox squirrels. Very few, or it's predominated by fox squirrels. Not, not so much cat squirrels, but cat squirrels are part of that bottomland habitat. It's just not that not that oak forest anymore.

Shannon Tompkins [00:51:41] You know, the deer dog deal: you know, we could have an entire, we could spend a couple hours talking about that. That was a manifestation of it. It was

predicated on having access to these huge pieces of property that no one controlled access to. OK? What killed hunting deer with dogs in east Texas was the increase in the deer population and a recognition of landowners that they could actually get that, protecting and managing their deer herd could economically benefit them through leasing. So you had all this land being leased up, so you created conflicts with these people who run running these deer dog over property they had no access to. No legal access. It really didn't affect squirrel hunting in the larger sense that it led to, you know, restricting access, if that makes sense.

Shannon Tompkins [00:53:06] The deer dog wars of the 1980s were, were... someone needs to write a book. It was, it was ugly and painful. And, and really... It was, it was just a sad and ugly thing that was fated to happen as the landscape, and land use, and populations and attitudes toward wildlife and the access thing. Squirrel hunting is kind of a, squirrels and squirrel hunting were kind of collateral damage to all that.

David Todd [00:54:00] Something else that I think you said in in passing that, but maybe we didn't get enough time to really dwell on it was what the impact of reservoir construction, in the '50s and '60s might have meant for squirrel populations and squirrel hunting. Could you maybe add a little more detail to what you said?

Shannon Tompkins [00:54:21] Oh, of course. I mean that, you know, look at the, quite literally, millions of acres of bottoms, reservoirs by definition inundate bottomlands and hardwoods. You've got places like, you know, Toledo Bend which 180,000 surface acres, so 180,000 acres of squirrel habitat gone, right there. Rayburn, Livingston. And, and not just, not just the land that reservoirs drowned and made unavailable to the squirrels, but the change in hydrology by dams affect the riverine forest, the whole river system, the riverine forest downstream from those areas. So it deteriorated habitat that it didn't even, you know, it didn't drown. If it didn't drown, it is still damaged just by changing the hydrology of, of, of east Texas, of those river systems. So you didn't have you didn't have the seasonal flooding and the renourishment of those bottomlands, so you have decreasing productivity of those bottomlands that weren't drowned.

Shannon Tompkins [00:56:02] And then, of course, on top of that, you've got the change of the landscape. You know, in a lot of cases, the pine culture, monoculture, or the shift from, you know, to clearing areas and for improved pastures pretested. So you've got, you know, death by a thousand cuts. Does that make any sense?

David Todd [00:56:31] Sort of, sounds like a war of attrition. Well, when you look back to all you've heard and read about squirrels, small game hunting in Texas, is there anything that sort of pops out at you, kind of your takeaway lesson?

Shannon Tompkins [00:56:57] Well, it's, it's. I'd really have to think about that. I guess it's just kind of like what happened to a small game hunting in Texas is kind of a microcosm of what's happened in, across the, changes across the state. It's, it's just a shift in priorities, attitudes. A lot of it's driven by opportunity and landscape changes, societal changes, shifts in population. It's just a, it's small game and small game hunting is a, this just a damage, I guess, just one of the victims of a changing world. You know, we live in a state where there are three times as many people in Texas as when I was born. I live now, I am part of the problem, just like everybody else. I now live in what used to be one of the most beautiful east Texas hardwood forests. It's insane. I mean, there were jaguars here, I mean, there were jaguars in the San Jacinto river bottom here 150 years ago, and black bears and wild turkeys. And it's

just, it's just what's happened to squirrels and small game hunting and small game hunters is this is a changing world, marginalized.

Shannon Tompkins [00:59:14] And there's no continuum of fathers teaching sons, teaching, friends, teaching daughters. And that's the other thing, in my family squirrel hunting, it wasn't just men? I mean, like I said, my mom was a heck of a squirrel hunter. It was it was something everybody did. And now it's something that they're, I guess it's other priorities. Other, you know, other things people are interested in. It's just not something that people think is worth their time or their efforts. And it takes considerable effort. That's the other thing is, it's not like, it's not like deer hunting. The same with rabbit hunting. I mean, it, it, you really got develop the skill, and invest the time and learn what you're doing. I guess that's it. It's just a ... small game and small game hunting in Texas is just collateral damage to changing landscape, changing cultural, and social forces. So, and it's a shame, I mean because it's such a, can be such an educational experience, and it's not not, it's not the, it's not the taking of the game, but.

Shannon Tompkins [01:01:02] People, I remember, spending time in the squirrel woods with my family and, and with, with folks like, you know, like the late Carl Frentress or Dan Lay or Ray Telfair or any number of men I knew. A walk through the woods with these guys squirrel hunting was not mostly about squirrel hunting. It was like they would stop and say, here's a mud plant. You know what a mud plant is? Here's French Mulberry. Do you know what Prince Mulberry is, American Beautyberry? Look here. Look where this, look where this deer ate off the ends of this. OK, this is. This is this. This is that. Look how this land goes like this. If you follow this, you know, you're going to come to a spring. Explain what baygalls were. It was like a flood gate, like a crash course in the world. And so much of that is being lost and not passed on. It's, it's sobering. And I guess that's my bottom line is the, you know, it's, the world's changed.

David Todd [01:02:35] It's interesting to me for such a small creature, it provides a window into really big, big changes. So thanks for explaining so much of it. Is there anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Shannon Tompkins [01:02:51] David, I don't know. I apologize for babbling on. I don't, I think about this stuff a lot. Well, I'm glad that, I'm so happy that you are doing all that you're doing, because so much of this is being lost, so much of this information in this history is being lost. And I just want to thank you for what you do. It's incredibly valuable, and become more and more valuable over time. It is you know, it is useful for positive things. You know, there are positive things out there. I mean there is becoming more and more awareness of values of things like that, with hardworking folks like that. And I just wish more people were educated on that. You can't love something you don't know.

David Todd [01:04:17] Or love.

Shannon Tompkins [01:04:24] If you never spend a day in an east Texas river bottom on a hot cocoa morning, full of squirrels. They felt the excuse to eat it. It has to be something that can really be. I would just wish that if that opportunity came more often and maybe it will maybe, you know, maybe there will be always be people that take that opportunity and find that value. I guess that's what I hope.

David Todd [01:05:15] Well, I think you know your explanation of why it's valuable and precious can go a long way to making sure that other people appreciate it, too. So, thank you

so much for your time today. And I hope that you will indulge who was another visit in the future because I'd love to hear more.

Shannon Tompkins [01:05:36] I would love to. I'd love to sit down with you. Maybe we can. I know we planned to try to get together a little earlier this year. 2020. So yeah, I really would love to just sit and visit with you and ask you a lot of questions, because I know you've talked to so many people out there that have such insight. That would be just lovely. Love to ask you some questions.

David Todd [01:06:17] So, well, that would probably be a pretty short conversation, but I would love to visit with you. And thank you so much for your time. And so let's talk soon again, OK?

Shannon Tompkins [01:06:33] Yes. Thank you for the opportunity.

David Todd [01:06:38] Well, it's been a treat. Thank you so much. Take care.

Shannon Tompkins [01:06:41] Good luck.

David Todd [01:06:43] All right.

Shannon Tompkins [01:06:43] Thanks a lot.

David Todd [01:06:45] All right. By, Shannon.