

CLAMOR AT MANKIN'S CROSSING

A scriptwriter might have called it "Revenge of the Plowboys." Farmers and ranchers had waited more than a year and a half for satisfaction, and they got it twice November 8, once through the defeat of Precinct 1 Commissioner Ron Wood and once by stopping Wood from knocking out a revered and still useful low-water bridge.

Commissioner Wood had miffed farmers in May, 1987, when he attributed the defeat of a \$32 million bond package for roads and bridges to a "plowboy mentality." For weeks on end, angry agriculturists set records for letters to the editor.

Weeks later, Wood publicly apologized for his remarks with a press release but farmers and ranchers were not appeased. They packed the commissioners court and called for Wood's resignation. He heard them out, but did not resign.

The rural crowd went home, but they didn't forget. And the old grievance boiled their blood again on election day, 1988.

Moments after the polls opened at 7 a.m. on November 8, Commissioner Wood's road-and-bridge crew showed up at the low-water bridge that has spanned the San Gabriel River east of Georgetown since 1913. The crew rolled a ram hoe, a heavy machine leased for \$175 an hour, onto the old span and began

pounding away, ripping out pavement, exposing steel girders, and shoving out a concrete beam.

A passing farmer saw what was going on and pulled his pickup truck into the path of the destruction. Wood's foreman shut down the job and awaited instructions. More farmers showed up. A deputy sheriff arrived to keep the peace. More farmers arrived. They were angry.

"This is the last straw. He's going to prove to these plowboys what he can do," said Fred "Coop" Smith, mayor pro tem of Weir.

Curtis Lee McDaniel, Wood's road-and-bridge foreman, was outnumbered and not too crazy about doing something to stir up the crowd.

"They're protesting our job and we don't know what to do next. And Ron [Wood] said to take it out," McDaniel told the deputy. But Wood couldn't be reached for new orders — he had an appointment with an eye doctor.

A woman left to get a lawyer, who in turn drew up a request for a temporary restraining order. Finally, more than three hours after the destruction had started, the radio crackled with a message received by Sheriff Jim Boutwell. He told the foreman to take the machinery away, that District Judge John Carter had issued a restraining order, pending a hearing.

The crossing was barricaded. Within days it was repaired, although it was kept closed a while longer so the new concrete could dry. Meanwhile a petition was circulated for support to preserve the structure. The Jonah Co-Op Gin Association donated \$500 to help defray legal expenses.

November 14, farmers packed the commissioners court to present a petition with nearly 1,100 signatures, supporting a request for a permanent injunction, to be aired in a district court, requesting Wood be prohibited from demolishing anything east of Interstate 35.

Wood agreed to a judgment approved November 15 by District Judge William Lott to refrain from damaging or restricting the use of Mankin's Crossing or any other roads, bridges, crossings or structures in Precinct 1 east of Interstate 35. The county even agreed to fork over more than \$1,800 in legal fees and legal expenses incurred by the farmers in gaining the restraining order and injunction.

Wood never explained the attempted destruction of Mankin's Crossing to the press. His foreman later told a columnist for the *Austin American-Statesman* it had been a mistake, that the crew was to have taken out another low-water crossing. But no other crossing was demolished.

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The Year's Top Ten Stories



small army of angry farmers waiting for a court order surround this tracked vehicle at Mankin's Crossing to prevent further destruction.