

WHICH SENDERO NEXT?

With the path of inequality cleared, where do female conservations go from here?

article by *Mary O. Parker*

MEAGAN HOOKER zips along the dusty sendero in the Polaris, carting Texas Brigades' cadets from station to station non-stop for nearly three hours. One look at the swirling south-Texas soil traveling behind the 16-year-old high school senior, and you know that by the time she finishes she'll have eaten a lot of dirt.

"Non-stop" might as well be Hooker's middle name. During the 13th Battalion of the South Texas Buckskin Brigade (STBUB), she had earned the invitation to serve as a Special Agent by mentoring Brigade cadets and conducting educational programs during the school year." But, this early June camp marks just the beginning; before summer's end, Hooker will participate in four out of six Brigades' camps.

That's a lot of dirt.

That's also a serious commitment to conservation and helps explain why TWA named the National Honor Society student and president of the 15-month Texas Brigades Wildlife Intensive Leadership Development (W.I.L.D.) 2012-2013 class as its 2012 Youth Volunteer of the Year.

In the past, even with a go-getter spirit like hers, Hooker's gender might have clipped her wings just as she set off to soar. Today, however, thanks to the trailblazing of prior generations, the thorny brush of inequality has been cleared enabling her and other young women like her – including the ladies who will capture STBUB Top Herd honors – to vigorously pursue conservation-related lifestyles.

Tina Y. Buford, who served two one-year terms as TWA's first female president from 2009-2011, knows this first-hand. "The generations prior to us – the Bass's, the Temples, the Armstrongs – that generation had the challenge of convincing others they could speak with authority on the subject of conservation and stewardship. They had the challenge of convincing the culture that

they should be listened to, that this is not just a gender specific passion, this feeling of involvement with the land," she explained. "And without them doing that, even 10 or 15 years ago, I don't think I would've been considered a viable candidate for presidency. Not because of TWA, but because that was the cultural norm."

Stated TWA CEO Gary Joiner, "Tina was our first female president, but I'm confident she won't be our last. Women have always had influence in the wildlife and conservation community but now, more and more, they have titles of authority that reflect this level of expertise and influence. They've always been out there walking the land. In past generations, their recognition may have come in association with a man's name or title because of the culture of the time. Not any more. Women are now fully recognized and respected in the wildlife and conservation community, on their own merits, as ranch managers, ranch owners, consultants, wildlife biologists, and in other influential roles.

According to Joiner, the number of women landowners in Texas continues to grow in both size and scope. "I'm told they're the most rapidly growing demographic of landowners in the state. This underserved group is in need of knowledge and expertise. That's part of why TWA established a *Women of the Land* program and advisory committee to reach out to both these new and advanced land stewards. Participants in the program learn everything from how to operate large equipment to plant identification, to habitat management."

A look at Texas A&M University enrollment records over the last 13 years supports Joiner's words; women now outpace men in their pursuit of agricultural science degrees. In fall 1999, stats for the Agriculture Department as a whole indicated that females comprised 45 percent of attendees. Within the agriculture department's Wildlife and Fisheries Science (WFSC) program that semester, females accounted for 42 percent of enrollment. By fall 2011, females made up the majority constituting 52 percent of those enrolled in the Department of Agriculture as a whole, and 54.5 percent of those in WFSC. Where males once accounted



for over half of those pursuing agricultural science degrees at Texas A&M University, we now find the opposite true.

Hooker's generation now faces other challenges. Ardent conservationist and TWA Director Deborah Clark explained, "Those women are becoming mothers or will soon become mothers with the challenge of unplugging their children and getting them outside. Somehow, this generation of young women conservationists will have to make the appreciation kids have for the outdoors not just a do-gooder hobby but a way of life."

Buford agreed that the next generation has unique tasks to tackle. "Those before us made certain things possible for my generation," she said. "And, I think that the next generation, because of the work done by mine, will be even further ahead, able to make a bigger impact. So, many of the phrases and words, for example, 'land stewardship,' are just beginning to be commonly used, but the challenge is still to make it relevant in places like Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. Since we've already introduced the terminology, the



Photo by David Smith

TINA Y. BUFORD, who currently serves on the TWA Executive Committee, became TWA's first female president in 2009, 24 years after the organization was founded. She credits women of prior generations with helping to make her candidacy possible. Pictured (l-r) with Tina in this Wildlife 2010 photo are TWA Co-Founder Gary Machen, TWA Senior Policy Analyst Kirby Brown, and TWA Co-Founders Larry Weishuhn and Murphy Ray Jr.



Photo by Rose Cooper

MEAGAN HOOKER (far right) is a 16-year old high school senior who attended four of six Texas Brigade leadership camps held this year, where she served as a cadet, Special Agent, and Assistant Leader (twice). She is president of the 2012-2013 W.I.L.D. class, and she is a Texas Youth Hunting Program Assistant Huntmaster. Hooker is a National Honor Society student and a vivacious member of the next generation of female conservationists. She is TWA's 2012 Youth Volunteer of the Year.



next generation should be able to move more quickly. They won't have to start with the fundamentals."

Retired educator and TWA Director Sue Price, who with her husband Gary, won the 2007 Leopold Land Conservation Award for Texas, and, in 2011, the Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship Award for their commitment to sustainable practices on their 2,160-acre "77 Ranch." Sue works to deliver that terminology – conservation and stewardship – to children through TWA's Learning Across New Dimensions in Science (L.A.N.D.S.) program. "I'm hoping that through the L.A.N.D.S. program, some of the girls involved can see a career, maybe as a biologist or something like that. A lot of times, we have a woman wildlife biologist from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) there," she said.

Even though Price grew up in the city, visiting her grandparents in the country planted the seeds for the conservationist she would become. "As a child, you're so impressionable. I can still hear that bobwhite whistle from when I was a little girl," she shared. "If the kids can get on the land, they can have a connection."



Photo: Kory Coifer

FORMER EDUCATOR and a current TWA Director Sue Price (far left, in white blouse) hosts children for L.A.N.D.S. workshops on her ranch. Price hopes the program will encourage girls to pursue stewardship-related careers. "With such careers," she says, "even if they can't afford to buy their own land, young women can find ways to get out on the land, love it, and teach others about it."



Photo courtesy of the Texas Brigades

THE "THE BUCK KICKERS," an all-female-cadet team, captured Top Herd honors at the 13th Battalion of the South Texas Buckskin Brigades in early June. Herd Leader (far left): Kenna Stapp (a recent Texas A&M University Ag Science grad); Cadets (l-r): Amber Tomlinson (15); Kayla Poorman (15); Myca Reed (16); Amanda Lanier (16); Katie Eacrett (16); and Assistant Herd Leader Tristan Summy.

Carter Smith, Executive Director of TPWD, shared the important role a woman played in creating his own childhood connection. "For me, it has always been about the wild things and wild places. I largely have my grandmother to thank for that. She loved the land, the birds, the wildlife, and everything about the natural world. One of her earliest gifts to me was a subscription to *Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine*. I miss her dearly, but am forever grateful for the interest in wildlife that she helped instill in me at an early age."

With both genders sharing deep affiliations for the land, the question arises: Do women connect to it differently? If so, how might their approach to conservation differ from their male counterparts?

Clark, who, with her husband Emry, practices holistic planned grazing on their 14,200 acres of Clay County native prairie, responded: "I do think we connect differently. For example, I have a phrase:

'Becoming intimate with the land.' My husband is as close to this land as anyone, but he would *never* say words like that. It came from going to QuailMasters (a joint educational program of Texas AgriLife Extension and TWA), where you learn about the plants on your own ranch. That whole process helped me become intimate with my land. I think it's that women want to know the details in a way that they can *feel* them."

Buford replied judiciously, "I know what I feel, and it is a sense of nurturing. I want to be very careful not to discount what men may feel, but I suspect that a lot of what women feel is an extension of being a mother, that desire to take care of the health and integrity of what we



Photo © 2012, Karl Wolfshohl

TWA DIRECTOR DEBORAH CLARK CREDITS THE CONSERVATION COMMUNITY – particularly her female mentors – with helping her grasp synergies between livestock, wildlife, and plant communities. Of her passion to learn and subsequent contributions, Clark shares, "I was like a sponge. I soaked it up and had to squeeze it back out. This is a community about giving back."

have now and on into the future."

Clark entered the conservation arena just eight years ago when she stopped running the company she'd created and found herself hungry to understand the ever-changing variables involved in land and ranch management. "I became a workshop junkie," she quipped. "I'd say my mentors are Tamara Trail, Jenny Sanders, Helen Holdsworth and Tina Y. Buford. These are the women who helped me first when I had no idea what I was doing."

With such scaffolding now in place, a woman interested in entering the conservation arena today no longer needs to clear her own overwhelming and overgrown trail before getting started. Instead, Hooker and others will find options made visible by those who tread there before them. As Buford put it, "When you're not preoccupied with whether something is possible or not, you can get to work on what's possible."

But with so many paths now wide-open, which sendero do tomorrow's female conservationists venture down next?

Clark poignantly offered this suggestion: "How we choose to promote the choice we've made to live this lifestyle is important. We need to make sure the message gets out there that it is a conscious choice. That this is how we *want* to live our lives. It's no longer a competitive gender battle. Rather, it's simply about being authentic, living how you were intended to live and in an intentional manner."

Clark's words linger on the hot edge of that South Texas sendero as Hooker expertly maneuvers the Polaris. Once the wake of her dust settles, it becomes clear that this is one young woman who intends to live intentionally. 🌱

