

*Interpretive Guide to:*

# ABILENE

## STATE PARK



Prominently sited atop the park's highest hill, the refectory's second-level observation tower offers a panoramic view of the area.

ABILENE STATE PARK IS NESTLED AROUND A BEAUTIFUL GROVE OF OAK, ELM AND PECAN TREES ALONG ELM CREEK. THE THICK CANOPIES OF TREES ARE UNUSUAL FOR THIS PART OF TEXAS AND PROVIDE A WOODED OASIS THROUGHOUT THE PARK. LONG BEFORE PIONEERS ARRIVED, NATIVE AMERICANS, SUCH AS THE TONKAWA AND COMANCHE, CAMPED ALONG ELM CREEK WHILE HUNTING BUFFALO AS THE HERDS MIGRATED THROUGH NEARBY BUFFALO GAP.

IN THE EARLY 1930s, THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS BUILT THE ORIGINAL STONE STRUCTURES. THE MASONRY ARCHES AND INTRICATE STONWORK OF LOCALLY QUARRIED RED SANDSTONE AND NATIVE LIMESTONE ARE AN ENDURING LEGACY.



### ENJOY THE RICHNESS OF ABILENE SP

The park offers camping, hiking, biking, nature study, picnicking, summertime swimming, birdwatching and fishing, and is a great place for family reunions. Eagle Trail, constructed by local Boy Scouts, wanders down to Buffalo Wallow Pond, a one-acre pond developed with children in mind. Stocked with sunfish, bass and channel catfish, all you need is a cane pole, a red-and-white bobber and a can of night crawlers to have a great time fishing. A portion of the official Texas longhorn herd grazes at the park, allowing visitors to see the living legends that changed Texas.

You can help us ensure the continuity of this natural and cultural resource by cleaning up litter. This helps prevent stream pollution and keeps the scenery beautiful for other visitors. Feeding wild animals is prohibited at state parks; help them to stay on a healthy, natural diet while also preventing animals from invading campsites in search of food. We are the stewards of these great lands and each have a part to play.

For more information about activities, programs or volunteering, contact the park or visit our Web site.

Abilene State Park • 150 Park Road 32, Tuscola, TX 79562  
(325) 572-3204 • [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/abilene/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/abilene/)



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## A NATURAL SETTING

The park lies in a valley surrounded by the low limestone hills of the Callahan Divide. The divide is an area of higher country, rising 200–300 feet above the surrounding plains that separates the watersheds of the Brazos and Colorado rivers. The hills are sparsely wooded with mesquites, stunted Ashe junipers and mixed grasses, while Elm Creek waters a lush haven of woodland. Pecans, live oaks, red oaks, willows, hackberries and elms provide a thick canopy of shade in the creek's floodplain. These lowlands sustain an array of plant and animal populations seldom found in this particular area of Texas.

The thick canopies and undergrowth provide habitat for a wide variety of birds, such as hawks, hummingbirds, mockingbirds, woodpeckers, wrens, Mississippi kites and roadrunners. Along the wooded trails you may glimpse a white-tailed deer, raccoon, armadillo, fox, squirrel or cottontail rabbit. Popular fish found in Elm Creek and Lake Abilene include bass, crappie, catfish and perch.

Buffalo Gap, an early frontier settlement, is a small town a few miles northeast of the park. It is located in a natural pass through the hills of the Callahan Divide that is also known as Buffalo Gap. The gap created an easy travel route through the hills and was once used by great herds of buffalo during their seasonal migrations. Native Americans, such as the Tonkawa and Comanche, also used the gap as a travel route while hunting the buffalo. The groves of pecan trees on Elm Creek served as ideal campgrounds. Buffalo Gap was later used by cattle drives on the Western or Goodnight-Loving trail and the famous Butterfield Stage.

## CREATING A LAKE AND A PARK

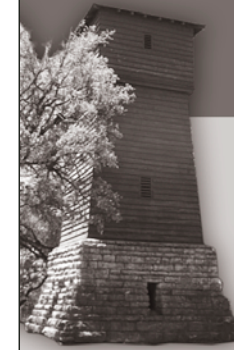
By the mid-1880s, at the height of the livestock boom, the area of present-day Abilene State Park and Lake Abilene was occupied by families who had come to the region in the late 1870s. They farmed the bottomlands near Elm Creek and raised sheep and cattle on the uplands.

In the early 1900s, Abilene already held promise as one of the state's more important metropolitan areas. As the town grew, so did its need for a reliable city water supply, a primary concern for any settlement in semi-arid West Texas. In 1918, in a progressive move for future development, citizens approved plans to construct a reservoir on Elm Creek. They constructed the dam creating Lake Abilene to provide a reliable water supply. The other public benefits included the creation of public recreational areas adjacent to the shoreline.

Construction of Lake Abilene altered the landscape of upper Elm Creek. What previously had been a continuous agricultural landscape of farmsteads and fields, and of rough cedar breaks, was disrupted after 1920. The city's ownership of an additional 500 acres downstream from the dam effectively withdrew that area from agricultural use, as well. Unfortunately, the lake proved ineffective (even going dry in 1927) and was replaced as a city water source in the late 1920s. The public's increasing interest in outdoor recreation during the 1920s, the construction of a drivable road to the area, the commitment of city and state officials to the idea of parks, all created an environment that made the dedication of a park on city land a growing possibility.



## AN ENDURING MONUMENT



The Great Depression, drought and unemployment were but a few of the things worrying Texans, and the nation, in the early 1930s. After his inauguration in 1933, President

Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as the first New Deal recovery program. It established work camps throughout the nation where unemployed young men worked on conservation and construction projects on public lands under the general supervision of the National Park Service.

Abilene was a leading candidate for a new state park because of its growing urban population, its role as a leading city of West Texas, and its location along major cross-state highways. The Abilene Board of Commissioners voted on August 12, 1933, to offer 507 acres of city land along Elm Creek to the state for the site of a CCC camp. The city's quick action resulted in an immediate approval of their proposal, and by December 1933, a camp opened.

Enrollees of Veteran Company 1823, composed of World War I veterans, set up camp. Despite the older age of the veterans and the harshness and relative isolation of their camp, enrollees of Company 1823 nonetheless made major improvements to the park in short order. By May 1934, there were sufficient facilities to allow the park to be dedicated formally as a state park, although work continued on most of the major projects. The Company was pulled out of Abilene in October 1934, but returned in April 1935, having been reorganized as a unit for black veterans, the first of its kind in the state. Company 1823 then continued work at Abilene until reassigned in December 1935. The most prominent reminders of their labors are the stone water tower, swimming pool complex and picnic areas.