

Luckenbach, Population 0: How struggling town was bought by three friends for \$30,000 in 1970 and became a music venue that attracts tourists from across the globe even though no one lives there

- › Luckenbach, Texas, was first established as a trading post by German immigrants in 1849, making it one of the oldest settlements in Gillespie County
- › At one time Luckenbach's growing population supported a post office, school, dance hall, general store, blacksmith shop and steam-powered cotton gin
- › When the county improved the roads, most of the farmers around Luckenbach began shopping in nearby Fredericksburg, leaving the tiny town to wither away
- › This Texas Hill Country town was purchased in 1970 by Hondo Crouch, Guich Kook and Kathy Morgan because they wanted the dance hall to stay open later
- › It achieved legendary proportions in 1977 when Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson released the hit song Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)

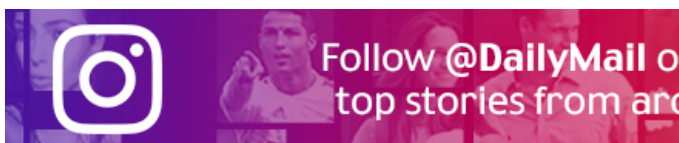
By [JORDAN GASS-POORE FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#)

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As the unofficial town motto goes, 'Everybody's somebody' in Luckenbach town there isn't anybody. At least not full time. Despite the 'Population zero' and is more of a near deserted cul-de-sac with a few disused

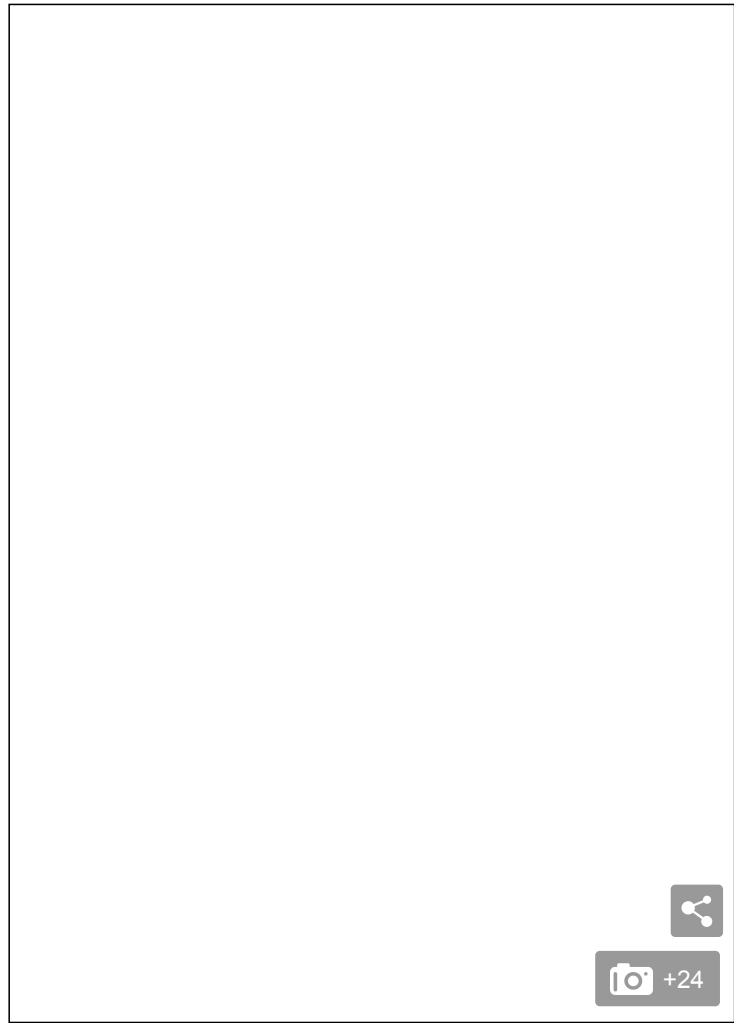
The general store and dance hall in a clearing among the trees hint at a more prosperous past. It takes about five minutes to fully explore the entirety of the town – 10 minutes if you stop to get acquainted with Doc, Miss Kitty and Smokey, the stray cats that roam the grounds.

Settled as a trading post in 1849 by a family of German immigrants to serve nearby farmers and establish trade with the Comanche tribe, the town's population peaked at 492 in 1904 when it supported a post office, school, dance hall, general store, and a blacksmith shop. But by 1964 the school closed because there weren't enough children to justify keeping it open and those who lived near the town were sent the 13 miles to Fredericksburg for their education. With the improvement of rural roads in Gillespie County, most of the farmers around Luckenbach began shopping in Fredericksburg too, leaving the tiny town to wither away.



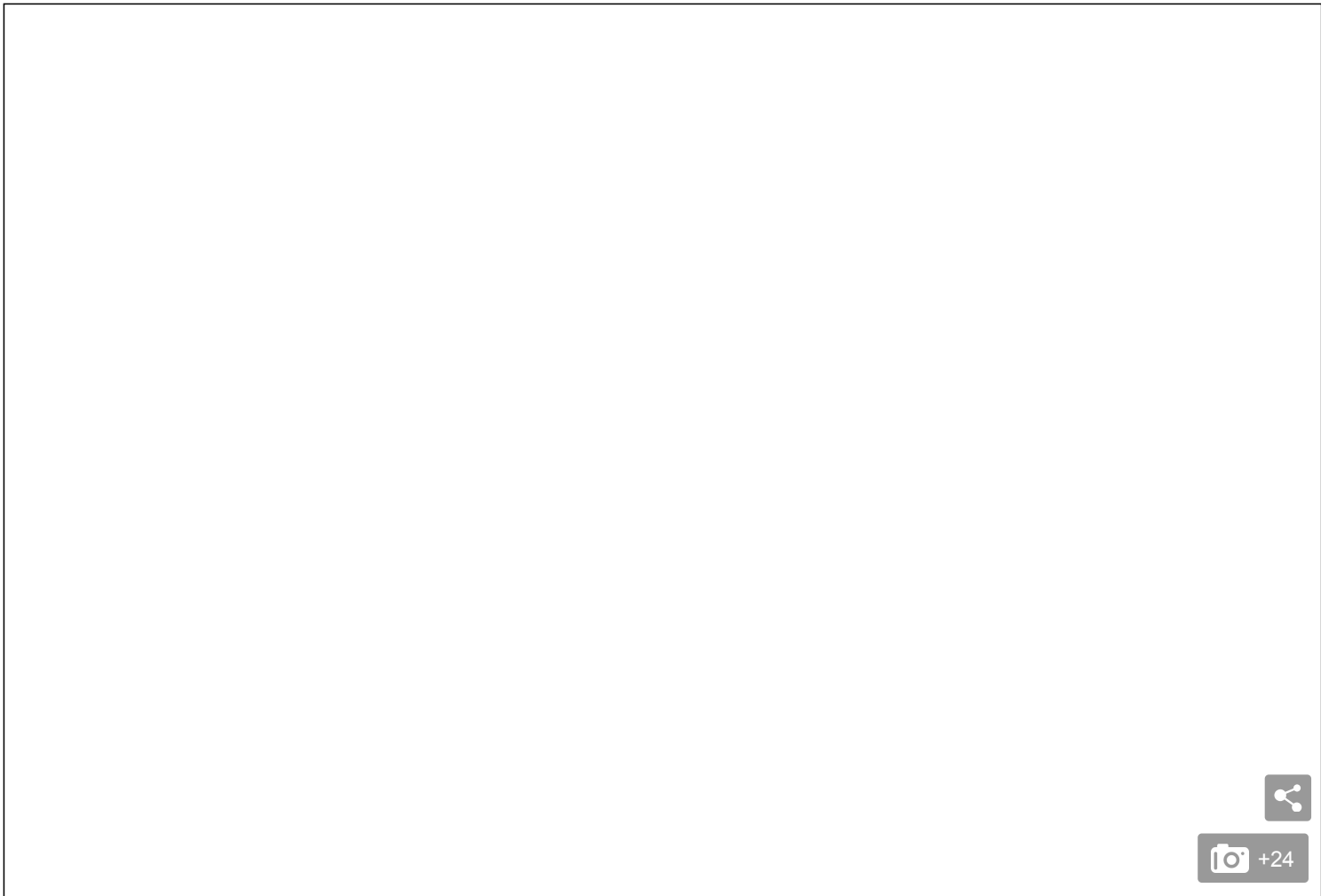
Luckenbach, Texas, was first established as a trading post in 1849 by the Engel family, making it one of the oldest settlements in Gillespie County. Pictured is the exterior of the town's post office, which closed in 1969 when its post master retired





The town's post office also functioned as its general store, built to serve nearby farmers and to establish trade with the Comanche tribe. Here the Engel family sold food, tobacco, toiletries and dry goods, as seen in this undated interior shot





The only remaining structures are the dance hall and general store, the inside of which is shown in this undated photo. Despite the 'Population 3' sign no one lives in Luckenbach anymore, yet it remains a popular tourist destination

In 1970 came what seemed to be the final nail in Luckenbach's coffin: the post master retired and placed an advertisement in the local paper: 'Town for sale – lock, stock and dance hall'.

It was nothing if not a sign of desperation from a descendant of one of the town's founders.

What happened next not only saved the town but also put it on the map – if not as somewhere to live, then certainly as a destination for visitors and music lovers and also as a living metaphor for retreat from modern life's pressures.

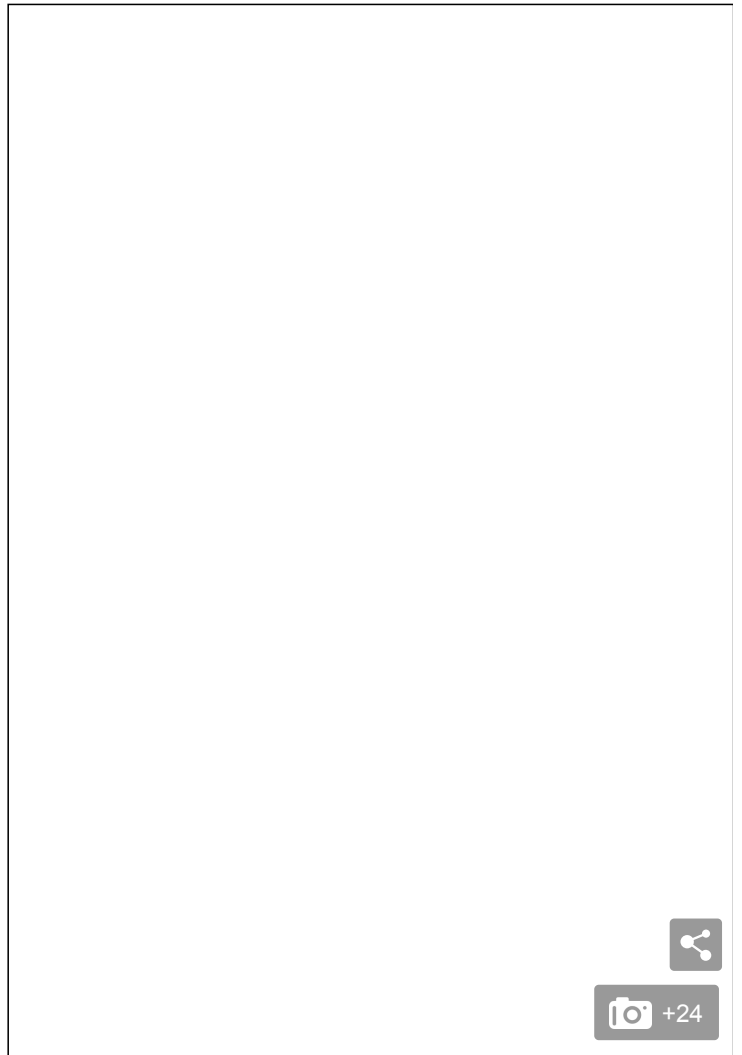
If legend is correct, Luckenbach should have been a household name more than a century earlier when in 1865 the schoolmaster who happened to be an inventor was said to have flown the first airplane. It was 38 years before the Wright brothers made their maiden voyage. But Jacob Brodbeck's plane, powered by coiled springs, was destroyed by its abrupt landing and was promptly forgotten.

But in 1970 Luckenbach was in luck.

A trio from central Texas saw the newspaper advert placed by retired and wanted the dance hall to stay open later, they put in a bid. \$30,000

The town's 'Population 3' sign memorializes them - John Russell 'Helen Ruth 'Shatzie' Stieler, the daughter of a successful goat farm aspiring actor working on his parents' ranch. No one today knows





William 'Guich' Kooch (left), Kathy Morgan (center) and Hondo Crouch (right) pose in front of Luckenbach's former post office. They hosted a series of zany events in town





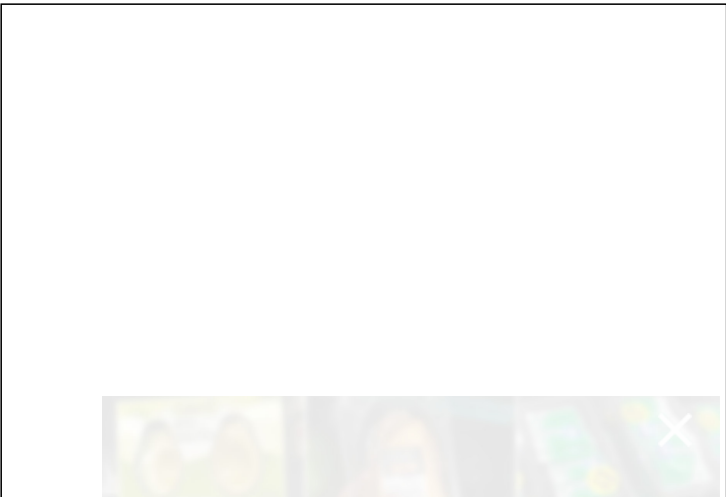
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Decades later thousands of people from around the world still travel to Luckenbach every year for the town's almost daily events. This sign welcomes visitors to the town and promotes its annual women's chili cook-off

Initially they had planned to keep Luckenbach just as it was, a sort of living museum that would serve the area's residents as well as cater to the tourists who had started exploring the Hill Country.

Aside from the fact that almost nothing had been changed on the property - the general store was covered with old signs, and the inside was a collection of random merchandise that looked better suited to an antique shop - there was an additional problem with their plan: The USPS was closing the Luckenbach branch. Without it the general store wouldn't be able to break even.

Mercifully, their unusual decision to buy an entire Texas town they never lived in for the equivalent of \$194,000 in today's money brought plenty of media attention. And with media attention came tourists.



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Crouch, known as Hondo because that's where he was born, appointed himself mayor and began promoting the largely abandoned town as a beer-drinking mecca for guitar-toting cowboys. His wife, who had been the most committed to preservation, dropped out of the venture when she saw the direction the men were taking the town though she remained married to Crouch.





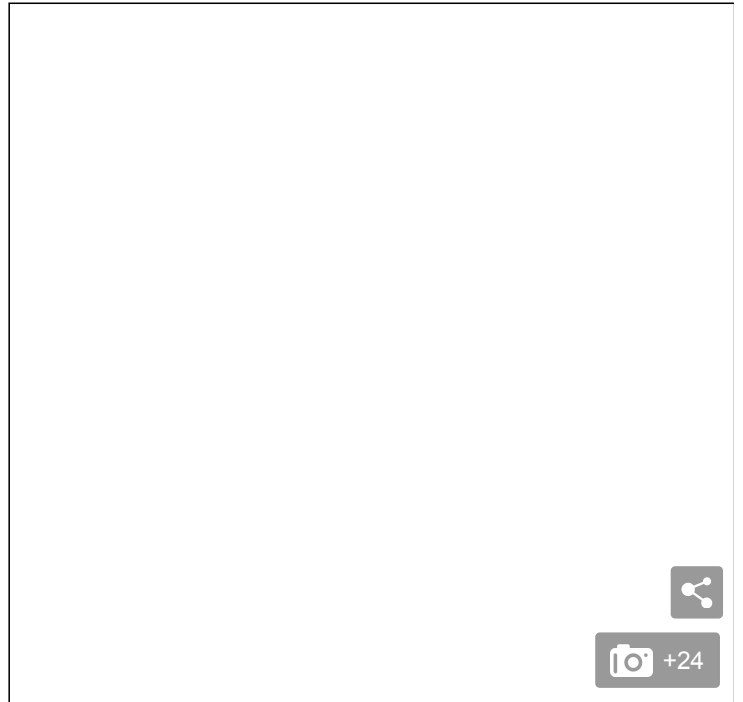
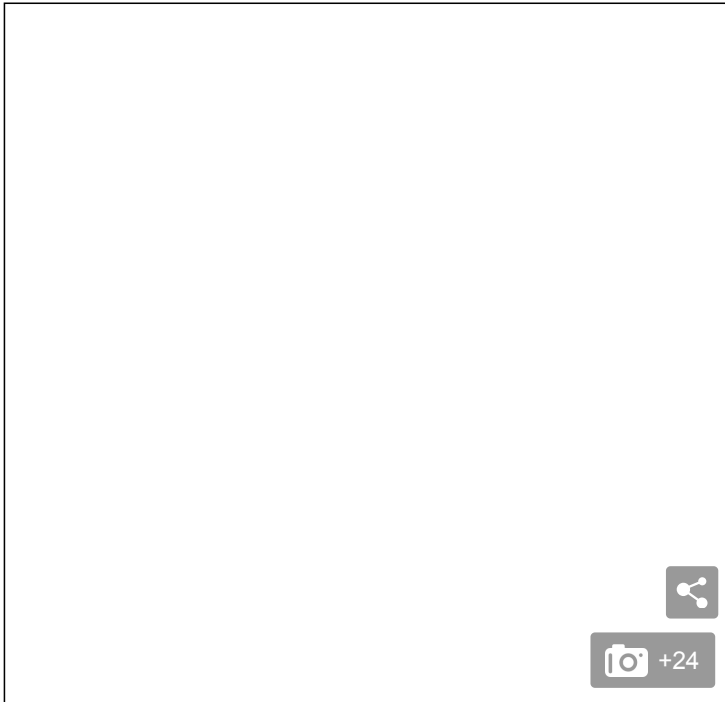
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Becky Crouch Patterson and her father Hondo Crouch pose on her family's goat ranch in this undated photo. Becky wrote the memoir 'Hondo, My Father', which describes his life as a successful swimmer, father, husband and co-owner of Luckenbach

For their part the men acquired a new business partner in their acquaintance Kathy Morgan and the new trio proceeded to host a series of zany events to attract visitors: all-women chili cook-offs, World Fairs and celebrations of the mud dauber wasps' return to the town. Of their attempts, only the mud dauber festival still exists.

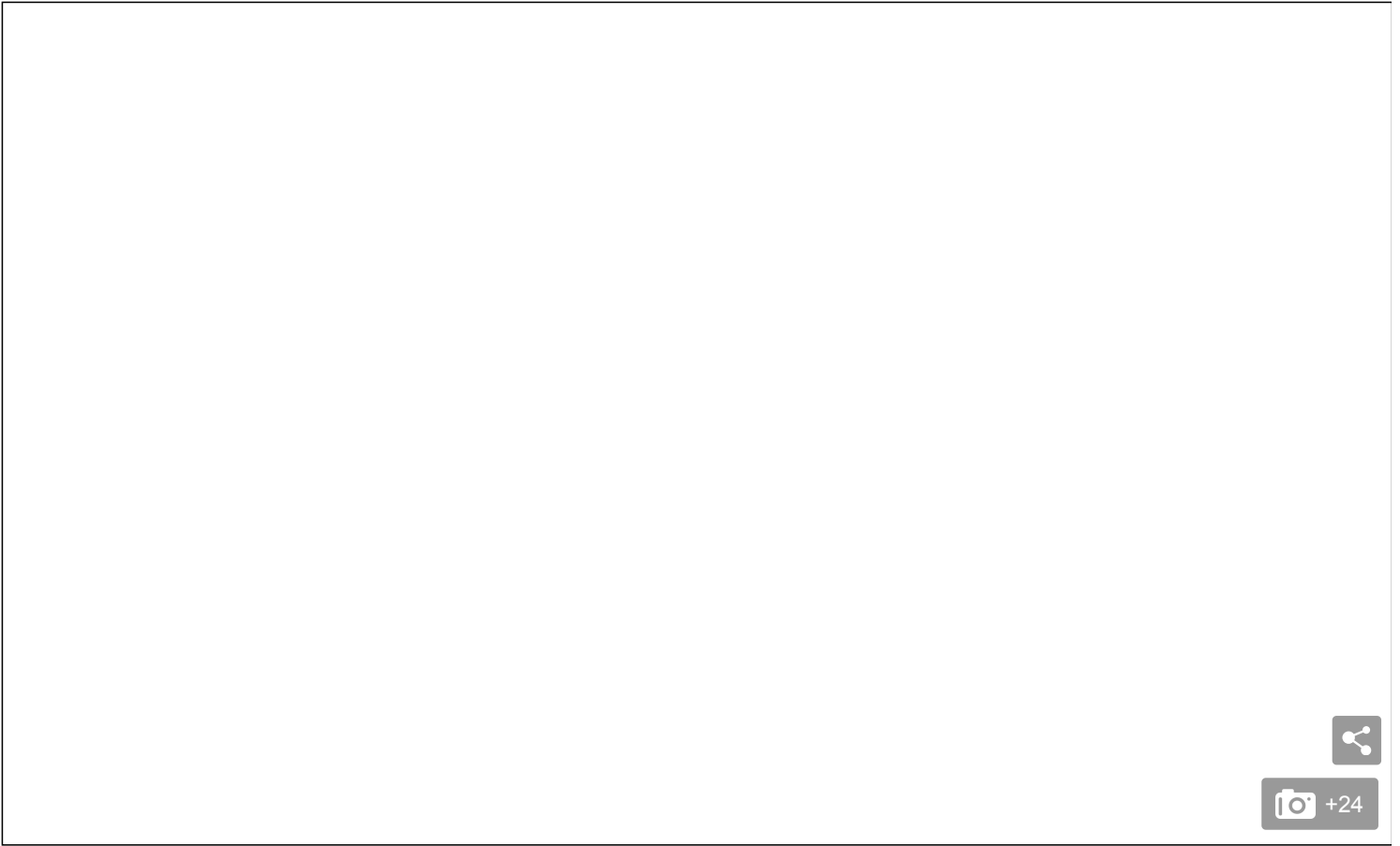
On quieter days, Crouch and Kook would host 'picker circles' playing somebody-done-somebody-wrong songs, and occasionally New York singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker would drop in. It was these that would really make Luckenbach's name.

In 1973, Walker brought cult status to Luckenbach when he recorded his album ¡Viva Terlingua! In the town dance hall and used photographs of Crouch and the town on the album cover.



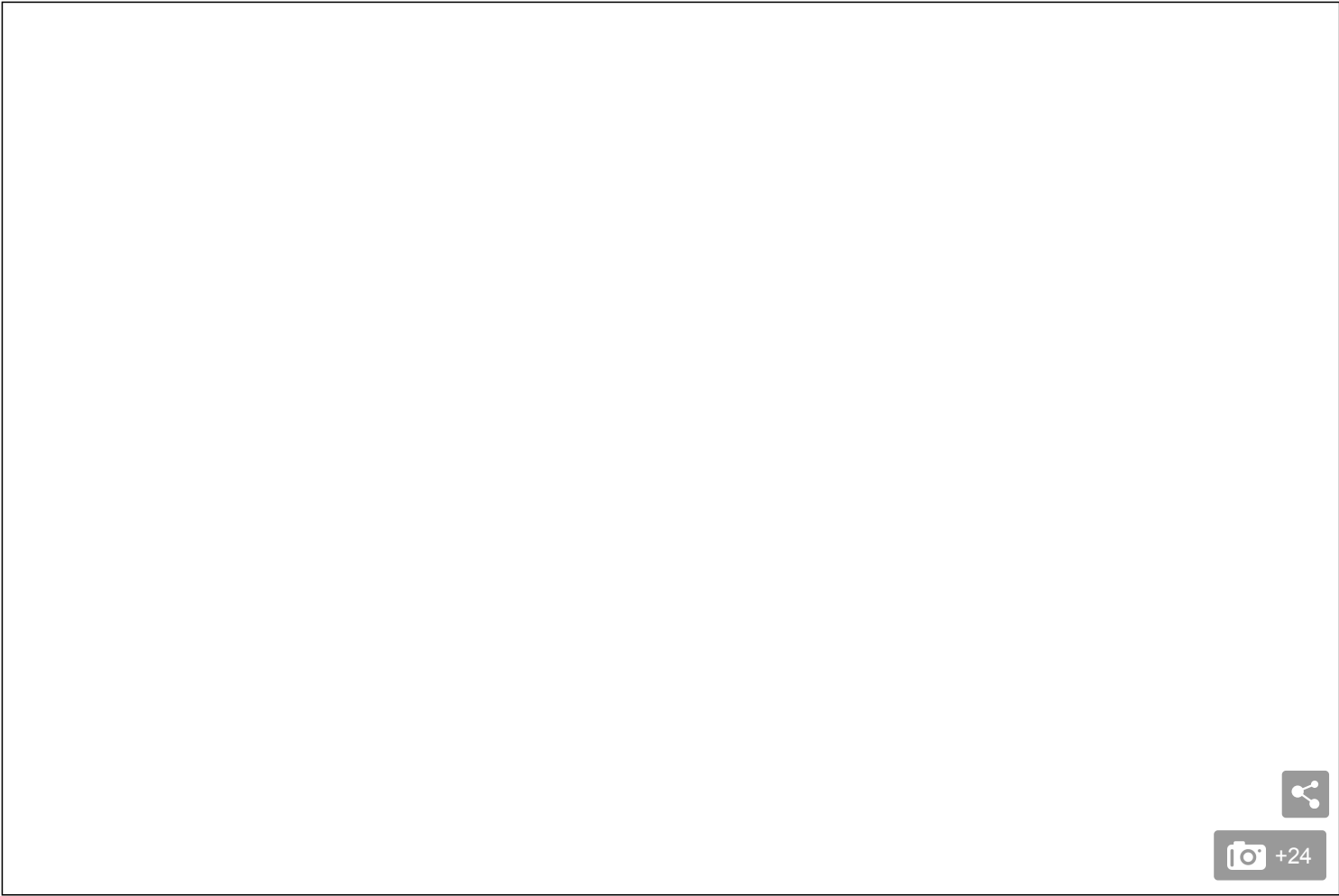
Singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker (pictured) would regularly visit Luckenbach in the early 1970s. The New Yorker had embraced Crouch as a father figure when they'd met through mutual friends in Austin several years earlier



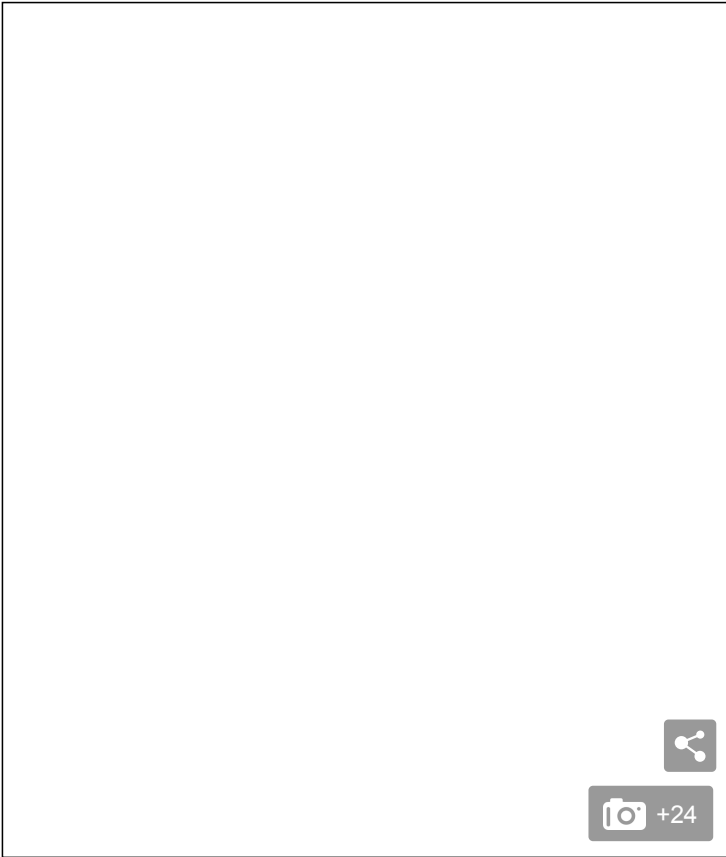


People in this undated photo celebrate the annual return of the mud daubers in Luckenbach, one of the festival's started by Crouch, Kook and Morgan in the 1970s. Of their attempts, only this springtime event in that pesky insect's honor still exists





This chalkboard sign in Luckenbach's general store reads 'Heres mud in yer eye', promoting the town's mud dauber festival. The annual event includes a contest to see who witnesses the first mud dauber nest, which usually coat the buildings rafters



Those close to Crouch (pictured) reported that toward the end of his life it became difficult to distinguish the 'real' Crouch from his folksy shtick. For years he satirized country life under the pen name Peter Cedarstacker for the Comfort News

It was a fitting tribute to the man who 'imagineered' Luckenbach. Crouch had envisioned the town as an escape from the commercialization he saw sweeping other parts of Gillespie County. He coined the town's motto 'Everybody is somebody in Luckenbach'.

By 1977 Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson recorded the anti-stress, anti-materialism anthem Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love) about an upscale couple experiencing marital problems.

It doesn't matter that the song was written by a Memphis producer and a Nashville musician - when Bobby Emmons and Chip Moman - who had never actually been to the town. The duo's sentiment in romanticizing the Hill Country experience has inspired crowds to return to the roots they never had.

And 40 years on thousands of people from around the world continue to travel here every year to pay homage to the music legends that have played this hallowed ground. Luckenbach had found its niche and now the town hosts almost daily events, from well-known artists to unknown performers.

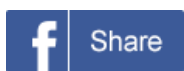
'The art of singer-songwriting has stayed very important to Luckenbach,' said Laurie Jasinski with the Handbook of Texas. 'It's created more mystique about its musical heritage and the more you propagate this the more musicians want to come.'

Jennings died in 2002 and Nelson hasn't visited since he ended his 44-year-old tradition of holding his annual Fourth of July picnics in Luckenbach in 1999.



A smiling bust of Crouch with a blue bandana around its neck stands in front of Luckenbach's post office-turned-general store

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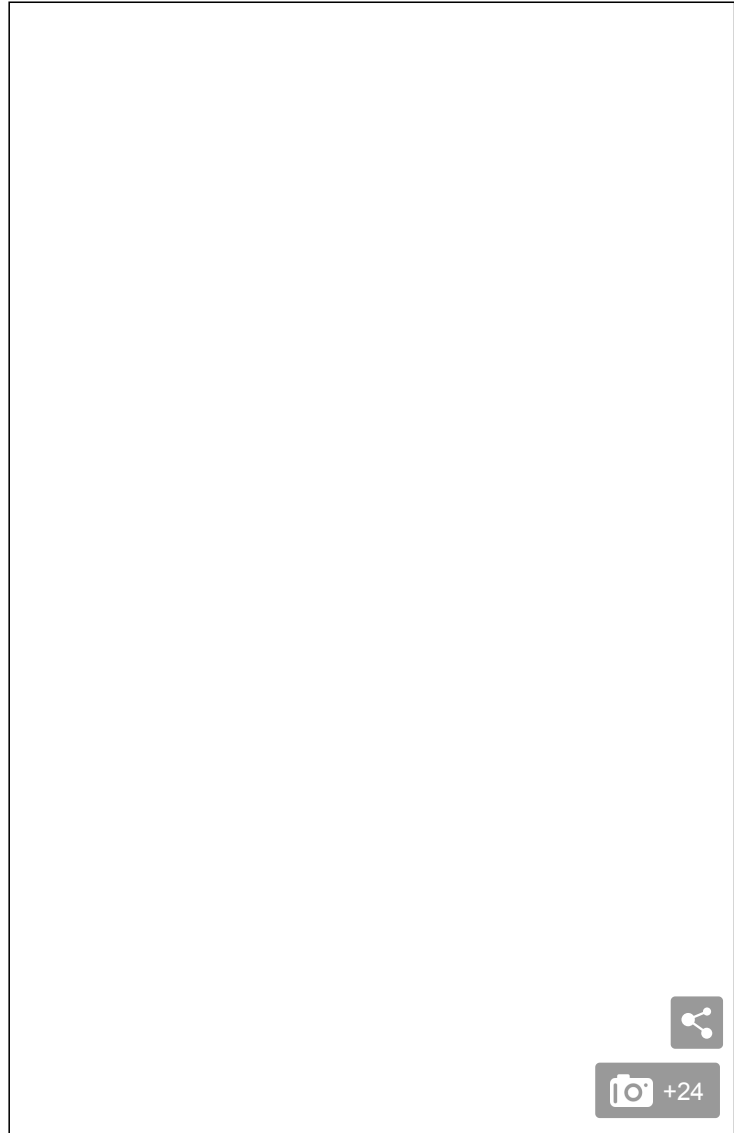
Crouch himself is an enigma. His attempts at preserving Texas cul good natured, but those close to him reported that toward the en the 'real' Crouch from his folksy shtick.

For 30 years, his daughter Becky Crouch Patterson tried to piece t years they lived together under the same roof.

'We thought of him as sort of an Indian guide who lives with us,' sl her memoir Hondo, My Father. 'You know, we never really called h



daddy. And when we finally learned that there was a word in the English language that was daddy that sounded way too sissy to ever call him that.'



Becky's 46-year-old son Kit Patterson purchased his mother's share of Luckenbach around 1999. The Crouch family regularly visits the town, as seen in these photos of Becky with her brother Juan Crouch in 1995 (left) and her husband Dow (right)

Many Texans only knew him as the self-proclaimed 'Clown Prince of Luckenbach'. Very few knew of his painful upbringing: his father was an alcoholic and 'killed himself', according to Crouch's 46-year-old grandson Kit Patterson. 'There was a wit and sense of humor that came out of that pain.'

'Hondo was a genuine Texas tall tale,' said Crouch's daughter Becky.

Crouch wore many hats: he was a spinner of tall tales, a tobacco ch...

Crouch and Kook ended up losing themselves in the media maelst...

To some, Kook betrayed the spirit of Luckenbach when he left for I...

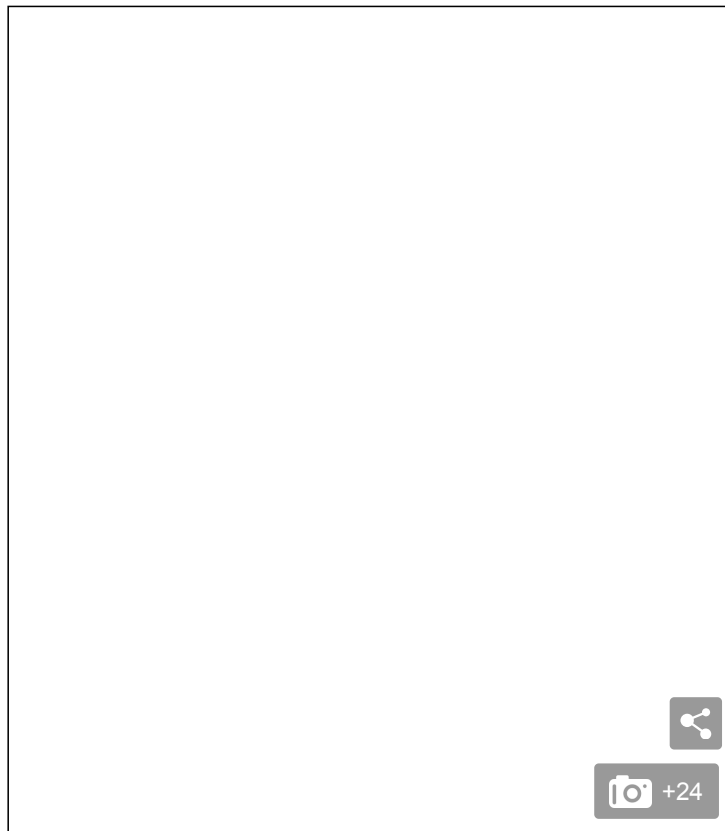


Others think the town's authenticity had already been tarnished when Crouch and Kook brought in the crowds. Later, regulars blamed Morgan for letting things change.

Shortly before Jennings and Nelson's famous duet, Crouch died of a heart attack at the age of 59 on September 27, 1976, in Blanco, Texas.

'He never knew it got to be that famous or that he got to be that famous,' said Kit. 'Hondo promoted the little guy. He loved the messiness.'

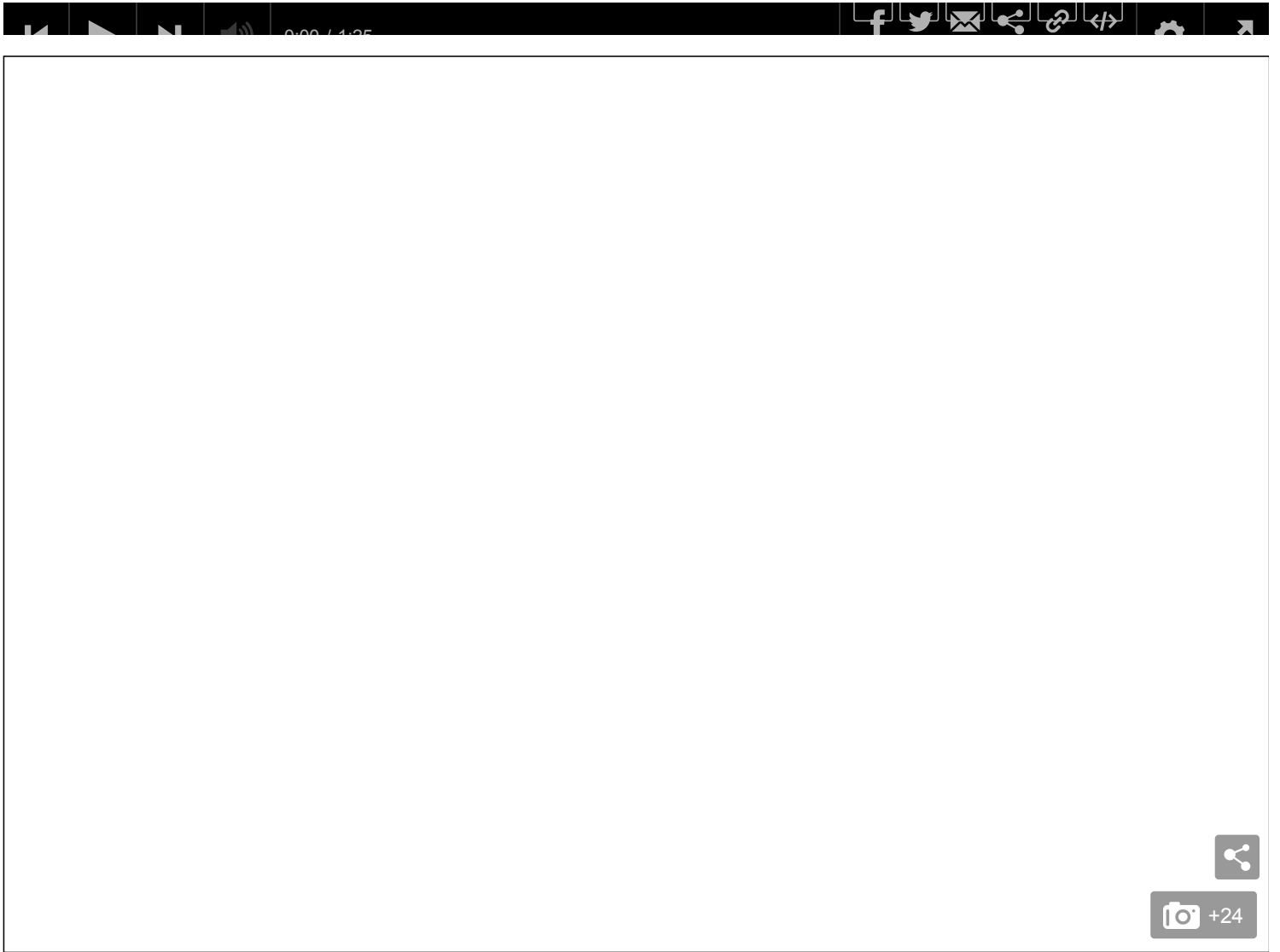
Over the years, Luckenbach has attracted all sorts of people - hippies, hopeful musicians and harried urbanites who feel alienated from the 'real' Texas and are inspired by the eponymous song to flee the city in search of an escape.



Guich's acting dreams became a reality in 1973 when he left Luckenbach for Hollywood to play a goofy deputy on the short-lived sitcom *Carter Country*, much to the chagrin of those around him. Since then, he's returned to Texas as an actor, though not many photos exist, and visits Luckenbach

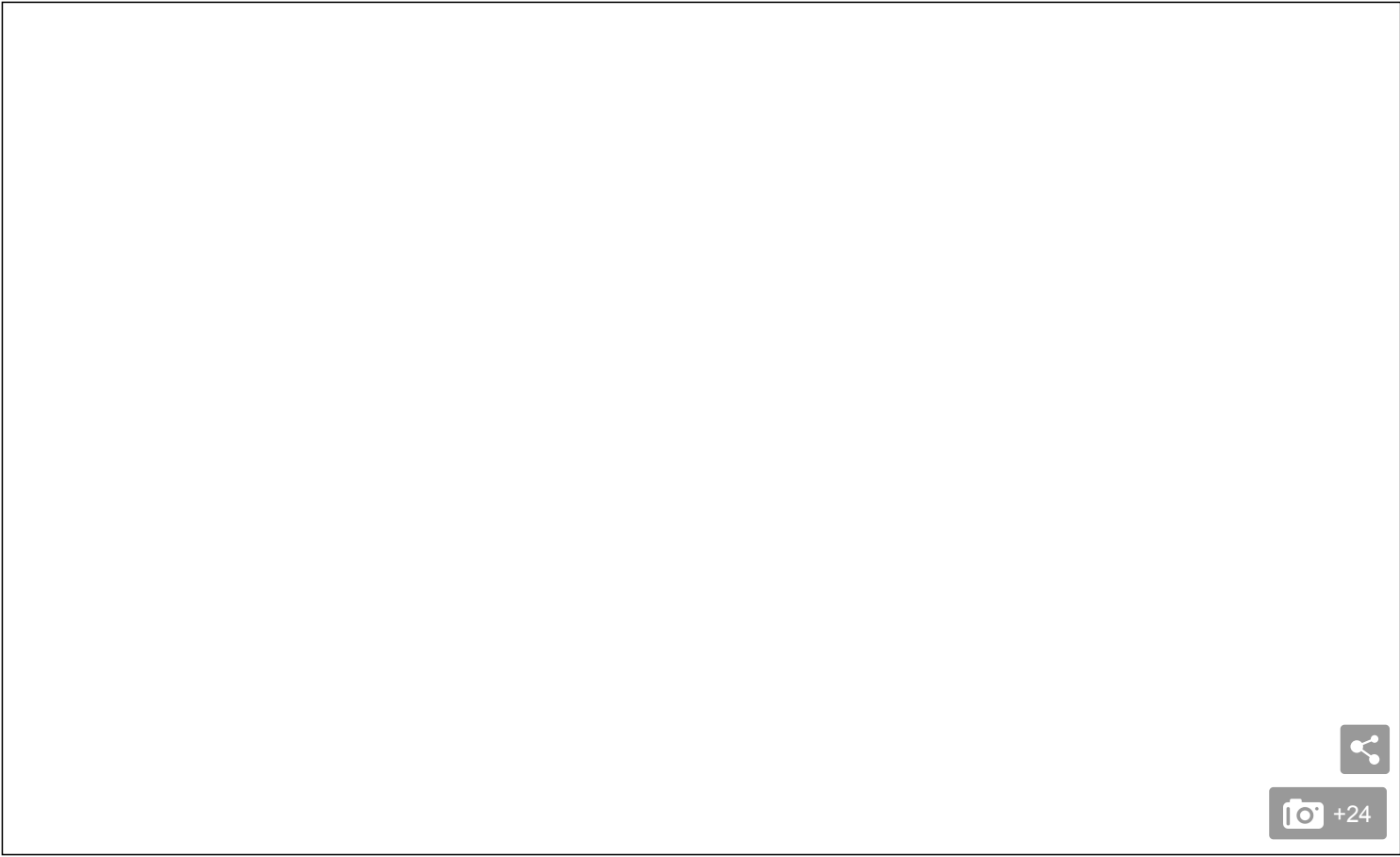
Visit Luckenbach Texas! It's what legends are made of





In 1904, Luckenbach's population peaked at 492. Here members of the town's German men's choir pose in front of the town's dance hall. They were one of about a dozen choirs organized in different German settlements across Gillespie County





Pictured are members of the Luckenbach Target Shooting Club, the first in Gillespie County, with their six-foot target rifles in the late 1800s. Shooting clubs were popular in the Texas Hill Country at the time, some of which still exist in the area

They would find it in this town reconstructed for tourists, but not far from its roots where good ol' boys pitch washers, a game similar to horseshoes, while musicians in raggedy cowboy hats strum guitars outside. Fresh-faced college kids knock back longnecks inside the bar. And older couples load souvenirs into the trunks of their minivans with out-of-state license plates.

'It's about the people. It's about being connected and making friends,' said Kit, who shares ownership of Luckenbach with his aunt Cris. 'We know people are down here for a reason.'

Luckenbach became so popular that souvenir hunters kept swiping the official street signs, said Bobbi McDaniel, the town's operations manager. The Texas Highway Department dutifully replaced them for years, just to have them stolen again and again. The agency finally gave up, deciding visitors who really wanted to find the place would do so.

Almost 50 years after Crouch and his friends designated Luckenbach as a holy city of all things



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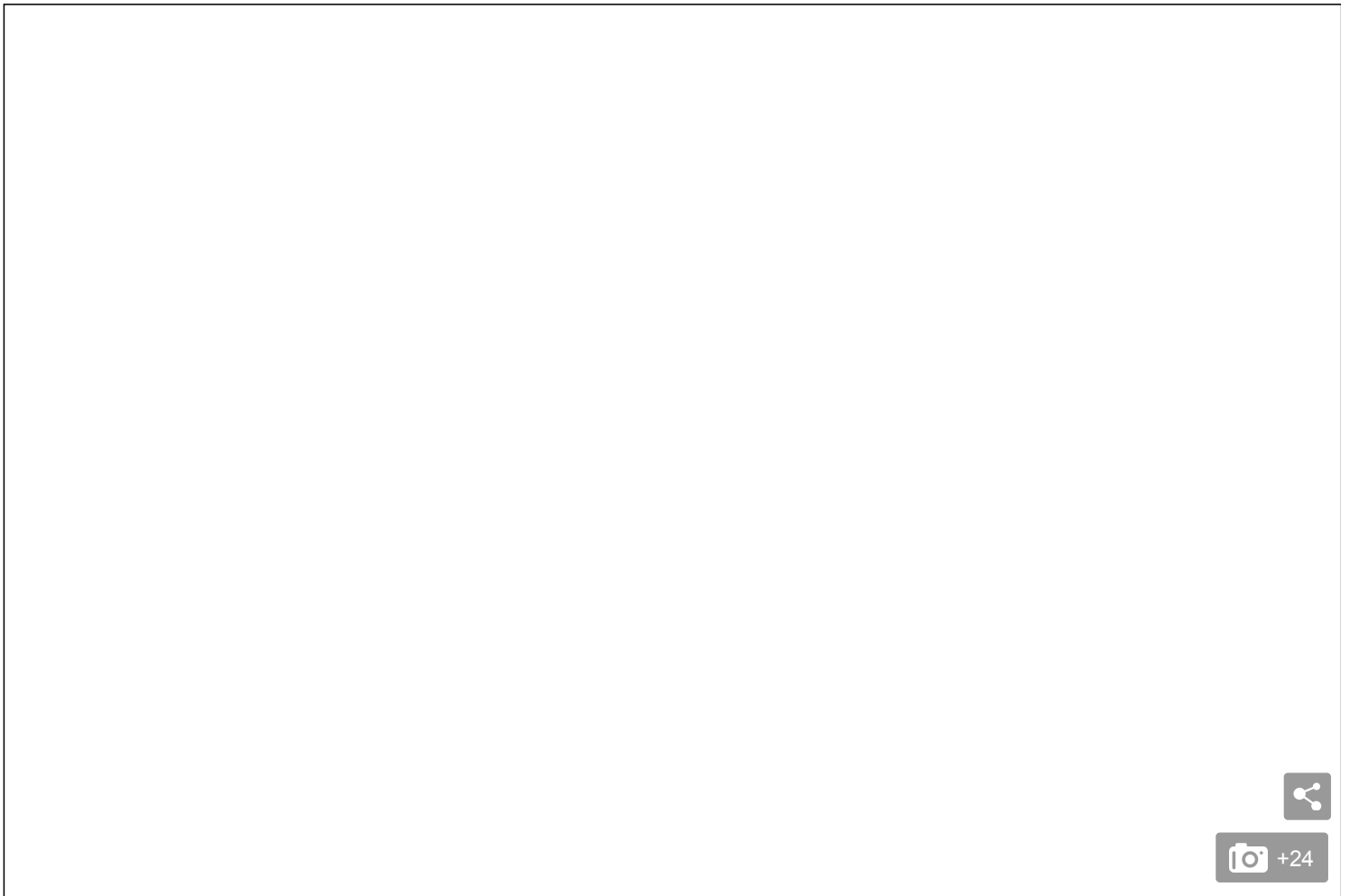
stereotypically Texan only minor changes have been made around the premises. Restrooms now have flush toilets. Acres have been purchased. And a smiling bust of Crouch stands sentinel at the general store.

Benno Engel, a descendant of Luckenbach's founders, lived in this rock house on the grounds until his death at age 72 in 1974. Four years prior, he retired as the town's postmaster and sold the 10-acre property to a trio of Texans for \$30,000

If Luckenbach's second life was under the ownership of Texans with overactive imaginations, the town's current incarnation is at the helm of a realist who's fostering a Texas music renaissance. The town was purchased by Patterson to carry on his grandfather Hondo's dream, after Kook's and Morgan's portion were sold to the Crouch family years ago.

After selling Luckenbach, Kook supported his acting career through a restaurant he bought and operated in nearby Fredericksburg. He continues to visit Luckenbach.

People now come to Luckenbach to remember how it was and to pretend it can still be that way, said Patterson. That's enough to satisfy most visitors.



Almost 50 years after Crouch and his friends designated Luckenbach as a holy city of all things stereotypically Texan only minor changes have been made around the premises. Here a man sits ou





Crouch, Kook and Morgan reportedly bought Luckenbach because they wanted the dance hall (pictured) to stay open later

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**This dance hall is where the settlers of Luckenbach held family reunions
remains a popular tourist spot, as seen in this photo of crowds gathered :**

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