

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--GUY GILLETTE PORTFOLIO INTRO--MALLORY

By Randy Mallory

TENDER-HEARTED

Guy Gillette's Portrait of rural East Texas during the Fifties and Sixties

During World War II, struggling stage performers found day jobs at a vegetarian eatery on New York City's West 57th Street called the Three-Fold. Guy Gillette, an aspiring 19-year-old actor from the upper Midwest, signed on as a busboy, replacing a fellow thespian by the name of Yul Brenner. Guy found more than work. He met a waitress named Doris Porter, a young fashion design student whose family farmed and ranched at Lovelady, Texas. Within a year the two married, and Guy and Doris headed west to meet her family. It would be the first of many eventful trips to Texas.

Ready for family life, Guy tired of the theater scene. He turned to another passion: photography.

When the first issue of *Life* magazine was published in 1936, the story-like quality of its photographs fascinated 14-year-old Guy. "This is what I want to do," he told himself. Guy's chance came in 1947. For two years, he took classes in New York from well-known photographer Sid Grossman. After building a portfolio of theater photos and portraits of businessmen, he headed to *Fortune* magazine. They liked what they saw. In 1950 they began giving him freelance assignments.

A photographer friend helped Guy sign with a top New York photo agent, and jobs began coming in from *Saturday Evening Post*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, and even *Life*. He also picked up assignments from ad agencies, designers, and corporations. While some photographers still lugged around

bulky 4x5 Speed Graphic cameras, Guy saw the potential of 35 mm photography for capturing candid slices of life.

In 1952 Guy landed a choice assignment. He spent three months at the height of the Korean Conflict documenting the the American Red Cross's role in that theater of war. His photos from the front-line and M.A.S.H. units ran in national magazines and won him "Best Picture Story of the Year" honors from the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

Guy's penchant for poignant moments led to other picture stories. He documented the plight of the elderly and urban ghetto youth in New York City. He photographed people at work--a neurosurgeon in training, a South Carolina produce truck driver, a traveling salesman in Missouri, and laborers at a Kentucky bourbon factory and cooperage.

During the Fifties and Sixties, Guy inadvertently put together his most personal "picture story."

After the birth of their first son, Guy, in 1945 (second son, Pipp, came along in 1950), the Gillettes traveled to Texas every summer for family visits. Sometimes they'd take the train--boarding at New York's bustling Penn Station and getting off, seemingly a world away, at the Lilliputian depot of Lovelady. Sometimes they'd trek by car.

As a fun father-and-sons project, Guy began photographing life around the Porter ranch. Besides, he considered his father-in-law, V.H. "Hoyt" Porter, a fascinating subject.

Hoyt Porter began farming cotton at Lovelady in 1912. As cotton markets changed, he moved into cattle ranching, and his wife, Lucy, ran a general merchandise store in town. At six-foot, four-inches-tall and 240 pounds, Hoyt proved an imposing figure, a tough man of strong will. But he had a soft spot for his grandsons, who called him "Big Daddy."

So Guy, with two Leica cameras strapped around his neck, photographed whatever caught his eye. He photographed the boys helping Big Daddy feed a bull from the back of a pick-up. He shot them learning the ways of camp cooking. He photographed the boys working cattle with longtime ranch-hand Dayton Owens. He caught them marveling at pennies flattened by a passing passenger train.

Ever the freelancer, Guy sold some of the pictures to magazines to help pay for the summer trips. Back in New York, he showed some Texas photos to Edward Steichen, famed photographer and director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. One shot--which pictured his son Guy, forlorn with an injured dog at the vet's--brought tears to Steichen's eye. Eventually, Steichen included two of Guy's Texas photos in his legendary book, *Family of Man*, published in 1954.

Guy spent most of his Texas visits on the ranch. In 1957, however, he drove the family from New York in his new black-and-orange Studebaker to photograph a picture story that would be a "natural." The village of Antioch, near Lovelady, was getting a new minister, sent to revitalize the local Baptist church. Guy's Leicas recorded members tearing down a farmhouse for lumber to fix up the church. When the minister and wife went for Sunday dinner at a member's farm, Guy tagged along. His photographs of the eventual homecoming at a rebuilt Antioch Baptist Church offer compelling documentation of a community at its best.

"I really loved doing those pictures. They were really me," Guy says. "The people were friendly and open and so real. It was one of my most heart-warming experiences in Texas."

Before he married into the Porter clan--and into the life of Lovelady, Texas-- Guy spent a brief stint as an Army medic. "They made a lot of actors into medics. I guess they figured we were tender-hearted," he recalls. Ironically, after a few months, the Army discharged Guy because of inadequate eyesight. The military obviously couldn't measure "perceptive" eyesight.

During a long and successful career, Guy Gillette produced a body of "tender-hearted" work which casts a penetrating glimpse at the human condition. His East Texas photos portray not only one family's story, but also the essence of a regional way of life in the middle of this century.

Hoyt and Lucy Porter died in the 1970s. In the mid-1980s, the Gillettes' sons, Guy and Pipp, returned to the ranch, restoring its neglected structures and reviving its cattle operation. They still live there, combining a love of ranching (learned through 20 summers in Texas) with a love of western music and lore. (See their story on page ____.)

Guy and Doris Gillette live near New York City, where Guy's timeless photos still find markets. And, as they've done so many times before, they still make an annual pilgrimage to Texas to spend time with family.