

# **Texans Extraordinaire**

Text by Randy Mallory

Each Texan has a story to tell. Each story comprises one thread in the unique tapestry that is the Lone Star State. Some threads seem to sparkle especially bright, glowing with special passion. Following are eight such Texas stories. Though not household names, these Texans are respected in their fields. By virtue of talent, good luck, and fortitude they have done extraordinary things. Each story is unique, yet together they reflect an enduring commitment to sense of place that makes Texas extraordinary.

## **Donna Shaver**

Donna Shaver first glimpsed the Gulf of Mexico at Padre Island National Seashore. She arrived in the early 1980s as a college student studying the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle. She fell in love—with the sea and the turtle—and dedicated her career to saving the smallest of the Gulf's five sea turtles.

Shaver became director of the National Park Service's turtle rescue program when only 702 Kemp's Ridley nests existed anywhere. Four decades earlier, the creature's primary nesting ground at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, boasted 40,000 nests. Human activity—fishing nets that drowned turtles and poachers who stole eggs—pushed the Kemp's Ridley to the brink.

To turn back the slide to extinction, Shaver coordinated park staff and thousands of volunteers during the next three decades. In spring they gathered mothers' eggs and hatched them at incubation facilities on Padre Island. In the summer they tagged and returned the hatchlings to the sea. The turtles became a source of pride and ecotourism on Padre Island, which in 2005 became the official "Sea Turtle Capital of Texas."

Last year, the program logged a record 209 Kemp's Ridley nests in Texas, including 116 on Padre Island, up from only four in 1995. Despite the comeback, Donna Shaver breathes only a tentative sigh of relief. Unfortunately, she's also the chief investigator assessing any sea turtle damage resulting from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

"These creatures have existed for four million years, and human activity nearly eliminated them," Shaver explains. "Our job is to right a wrong by protecting the turtle's place in the web of life."

In 2005 Donna Shaver was ABC World News' "Person of the Week." Last year she received the National Park Service Director's Award for Excellence in National Resource Research.

## **Tom Perini**

Tom Perini grew up in Abilene in the Fifties, but spent weekends on his family's ranch 15 miles south at Buffalo Gap. He loved cowboying—being outside, working with cattle, and cooking for the hands. Perini was so good at cooking steaks that other ranchers, including Watt Matthews of Lambshead Ranch, asked him to cater their shindigs. Matthews even steered Perini's career from raising beef to cooking it. In 1983 Tom Perini turned his hay barn into the rustic Perini Ranch Steakhouse at the end of a long dirt road.

"The first years were tough," Perini admits. "You can't see us from any highway, so we grew by word of mouth, cooking simple, quality food that looks good and tastes good." Perini grabbed headlines after he catered for Governor, then President George W. Bush, and even cooked at the prestigious James Beard House in New York City. Rave reviews led Tom and wife Lisa to launch a booming mail order business. The couple also authored the *Texas Cowboy Cooking* cookbook, established the annual Buffalo Gap Wine & Food Summit, and opened guest quarters at the ranch. Last year, 85,000 patrons made their way to the

restaurant for signature steaks, Southern fried catfish, Mexican hominy, and bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

One day Tom Perini noticed several men dressed in suits, a rarity at his laid-back joint. “They were from a steakhouse chain and asked me what I tried to do to make this place so Texan,” Perini recalls. “I told them, ‘I don’t, and it is.’”

When you’re the real McCoy, you don’t have to try.

### **Allison Orr**

Award-winning Austin choreographer Allison Orr is lifting the old Texas saying—dance with the one what brung ya—to new heights. During the past decade, the founder of Forklift Danceworks (and adjunct dance professor at Austin Community College) convinced groups of ordinary folks—from firefighters to roller skaters—to perform choreographed dances that reflect their lives and common humanity.

Everyday movement inspires the 42-year-old Texas native and lifelong dancer. She blends two college degrees (anthropology and choreography) in what she calls “ethnographic choreography.” “I want to choreograph untrained dancers to explore, as an anthropologist would, how communities function.”

Orr began the quest in 2001 with 13 firefighters performing their dangerous profession’s artistry of movement. She did a project with 30 roller skaters, another with a half-dozen expectant mothers, and another with five Elvis impersonators plus two trained dancers. Solo performances featured a symphony conductor and a police officer. Orr even rallied Venetian gondoliers to perform a floating ballet, and she got 300 two-steppers hoofing it at the steps of the Texas Capitol.

Her most famous work engaged 24 employees and 16 vehicles from Austin’s sanitation department. A documentary on the project, *Trash Dance*, premiered in the spring.

Her next project, *PowerUP*, will involve 30 workers and 20 utility poles, plus bucket trucks and cranes, from Austin's public power utility. (It premieres September 21-22, 2013 at the Travis County Expo Center.) Orr also works with children, adults over 65, and people with disabilities.

“I believe dance can break negative stereotypes by telling people’s stories in new ways,” Orr says. “Besides, I want to get everyone dancing. Dancing is natural for kids but gets harder as we age. It’s really part of who we are.”

### **Mary Kemp**

At age 86 Mary Kemp takes the long view about bluebonnets and history. For more than 30 years she has cultivated *both* on 220 acres in Mt. Nebo Valley south of Weatherford. Amid 20 acres of bluebonnets she and her husband, V. Kemp Jr. (who died in 1998), created a replica frontier village of a dozen structures anchored by the 1854 Thomas J. Shaw log cabin. Since 1980 period-dressed volunteers have welcomed thousands of visitors each spring to the village’s Shaw-Kemp Open House.

Growing up in the Mt. Nebo community, Mary Kemp soaked up stories of cowboys and Indians and living off the land. “Miss Mary,” as she’s known, remains a keeper of the flame for Parker County history. She served the county historical commission for decades, obtaining 17 state historical markers and helping get the courthouse restored. In 2001 she and lifelong friend, Leon Tanner—both in their 70s at the time—formed Nebo Valley Press to chronicle county history. They’ve published five books, plus two reprints. Proceeds support local charities, especially one started by Mary and V. Kemp in 1986.

Wandering the county on a coon hunt, V. Kemp came across an abandoned cemetery. He and Mary restored the site and did the same where Thomas J. Shaw is buried. With the

help of family and friends, they formed the Abandoned Cemetery Association of Parker County, which has restored and maintains 65 once-forgotten burial grounds.

Drought stifled bluebonnets at this year's Shaw-Kemp Open House. Not to worry, Mary Kemp reminds, "They'll come back." (She ought to know; she won the statewide Keep Texas Beautiful individual leadership award in 1996.) And what about her legacy in county history? More than anything, Miss Mary instills a love of heritage in the next generation. "When my grandkids and great-grandkids talk about me," she says with pride, "they say, 'She's full of history.'"

### **Joe & Lanna Duncan**

Tourism in the mountain west got a boost in 1930 with the opening of two nearly identical sister hotels designed by famed El Paso architect Henry C. Trost. Hotel Paisano in Marfa and Hotel El Capitan in Van Horn embodied elegant Spanish baroque style for decades. In the 1950s the Paisano even housed actors James Dean, Elizabeth Taylor, and Rock Hudson during the filming of the now-classic movie, *Giant*.

By the early 2000s the Paisano lay abandoned, and El Capitan was a bank. Native West Texans Joe and Lanna Duncan bought the venerable lodgings and spent years lovingly restoring them. Now the Paisano boasts 41 well-appointed rooms, and El Capitan 38. Both offer stylish restaurants, bars and gift boutiques. For the Duncans it was déjà vu all over again.

A decade earlier the couple had left their Dallas careers (real estate and school counseling, respectively) and returned home to Fort Davis where Joe's family ran the 1880s Hotel Limpia, and Lanna's operated the 1930s Stone Village Tourist Camp. Joe and Lanna bought the Limpia in 1991 and later the Stone Village and, with advise from other historic hotel operators, revitalized the lodgings. They also converted several historic adobe homes

to guest cottages. The Duncans, now in their 50s, sold their Fort Davis properties (except for three guest houses) but still call the tourist town home.

Their preservation work earned them the 2011 Claire Driscoll Award from Preservation Texas, plus the 2012 Phoenix Award for conservation and preservation from the Society of American Travel Writers.

“Historic preservation requires foresight and imagination,” Joe explains. “But the payoff in tourism is big,” adds Lanna. “It’s fun and rewarding to make historic places beautiful again.”

### **Lareatha H. Clay**

Most families start with a love story, but not many start like Lareatha Clay’s.

Two centuries ago her great-great-great-grandparents were born into slavery, Jim in Kentucky and Winnie in Tennessee. They ended up on a Mississippi plantation and fell in love. Heartbroken when a Texas farmer bought Winnie, Jim ran away to find her, trekking 400 miles under cover of night. After weeks of searching he found her at a spring gathering water for her master. Winnie convinced her owner to buy Jim, and after Emancipation Jim and Winnie Shankle became prominent landowners in the freedman’s town of Shankleville in Newton County.

Lareatha Clay, now a Dallas-based business consultant, grew up hearing that story at Homecoming, the Shankleville reunion held each summer since 1941. Clay and others formed the Shankleville Historical Society in 1988 to rekindle the freedman town’s heritage. The group reached a milestone last year when it placed a National Register of Historic Places plaque on the 1922 homestead of Addie L. and A.T. Odom, Clay’s grandparents. The Craftsman house and outbuildings sit on a hill above the spring where Jim found Winnie. Lareatha Clay aims to make the backwoods site a destination for African-American history.

She has practice at aiming high. As a member of the Texas Historical Commission she helped start a history internship program for under-represented ethnic youth. She also saw her mother and herself admitted as the first black members of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

“Some folks think historic preservation is only for the mansions of famous people,” Clay explains, “but everyone contributes, and everyone’s history is worth preserving. Even a modest house and a modest story are worth remembering.”

### **Loncito Cartwright**

When 53-year-old Loncito Cartwright says his family came to Texas before the war, he means the Texas Revolution of 1836. The original Texas Cartwrights came to East Texas in the 1820s and eventually owned a million acres across the state. In 1915 the family acquired ranchland near Dinero, 50 miles north of Corpus Christi, and named it Twin Oaks Ranch. During the past decade, Cartwright has steered the 6,000-acre cattle operation in a new direction—raising grass-fed, hormone-free, and antibiotic-free lamb.

“Irish settlers came to South Texas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and raised sheep,” says the Texas A&M history graduate, “so I’m returning to the past in many ways.” Today he raises 600 sheep and sells his Loncito’s Lamb directly to restaurants and consumers in Central and South Texas. His farm-to-table operation began in 2005 at the downtown Austin farmers market. “Top-end chefs started buying my lamb because they enjoyed its quality and were willing to pay for it,” says Cartwright. Word spread among restaurateurs and food writers about the tender, mild tasting meat. Two years ago Cartwright added free-range swine to the ranch. Wild hogs occasionally get in with his heritage crossbreeds, so he calls his 250 pigs “free-love” pork.

Natural foodies find Cartwright's fare at eateries such as The Cove and The Luxury in San Antonio, Whip In and Olivia in Austin, the Pink Pig in Fredericksburg, and the Venetian Hot Plate in Port Aransas. Home cooks find them at Austin's Boggy Creek Farm and through Farmhouse Delivery in Austin and Houston.

"I know our animals are happier roaming free." proclaims the sixth-generation Texan. "And it's a thrill for me to make friends with the people who buy food produced on our family's land."

### **Joel Guzmán**

In Spanish "conjunto" means "together." Conjunto is also a lively musical style born on the Texas-Mexico border in the early 1900s. Conjunto blends German traditions of the button accordion together with Mexican traditions of the *bajo sexto* 12-string guitar and the *contrabajo* string bass.

Accordionist, singer, and producer Joel Guzmán grew up playing Conjunto in his father's band in Washington State, where his family relocated from Texas in the 1950s. Over the years he played with the greats, including Santiago Almeida and Flaco Jiménez. Guzmán returned to Texas in the 1980s and spent the next three decades—along with his singer-songwriter wife and Texas native Sarah Fox—pushing the boundaries of Tex-Mex music. The bilingual Austin duo still play Conjunto, but they also blend it together with jazz, blues, and country, plus the tropical sounds of cumbia and salsa. They record and perform it with other top artists, ranging from Joe Ely and Rickie Lee Jones to Buddy Miller and Lee Ann Womack.

Guzmán won Grammys for the 1998 *Los Super Seven* and the 2004 *Polkas, Gritos y Acordeones* albums, plus another for the 2010 soundtrack of *Crazy Heart*, a film in which he



also acted. Guzmán and Fox both perform in the new film, *When Angels Sing*, which premiered at this year's SXSW festival in Austin.

At 56 Joel Guzmán plays and promotes the accordion with passion. He teaches accordion workshops around the country and hosts the annual Squeezebox Mania, an Austin celebration of all things accordion. He also directs the University of Texas at Austin's Tex-Mex Conjunto Ensemble.

"My musical roots reach back to the beginnings of Conjunto," Guzmán says. "It's my duty to act as a bridge between past and future and take this music in new and exciting ways."