

**Story and photographs by Randy Mallory**

## **OLD PLANO**

### **Heritage in a High-Tech Town**

*Money Magazine* recently named Plano the best place to live in the American West, among cities over 100,000. This north-central Texas city embodies high-tech edginess, power shopping, and upscale neighborhoods.

On a recent visit, I also found that vibrant Plano boasts a heart of old--a historic downtown with specialty shops, eateries, and arts venues housed in century-old structures...plus a few trendy attractions.

I began my old Plano visit down by the tracks where the city experienced its first boom.

In the 1850s, Plano was a sleepy farming community when Kentuckian Clint S. Haggard arrived with a large male "jack" donkey called "Mammoth Jack." Haggard used "Mammoth Jack" to operate the area's first major mule breeding business. The Houston and Texas Railroad arrived in 1872, and another prominent breeder, J. W. Shepard, built a barn near the depot and shipped mules all over the U.S. and south of the border. (The restored 1898 Plano Masonic Lodge and a pocket park now occupy that spot, as noted in one of several historic markers in downtown.)

The train's arrival also helped local blackland farmers ship products to distant markets. From 1908 to 1948, the Texas Electric Railway electrified the line and transported passengers and mail between Denison and Dallas.

Plano experienced a second boom from the late 1960s to the 1990s. Growth in high-tech jobs and real estate drove the city's population from 2,000 in 1950 to 243,000 today. Yet reminders of old Plano remain down by the tracks.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) recently revived electric rail, when it built a downtown station on the Red Line between Plano and Dallas. The station's architecture has a 19th-century style--with ornamental railings, brick and stone columns, and gull-wing roof supports. The site also sports a life-size sculpture of a horse, recalling the steam-powered "iron horse" days.

The DART station overlooks Haggard Park. The mule breeder's daughter, Emma Bishop, donated this tree-shaded, two-acre oasis in 1928 for a park. I happened upon a wedding underway in the newly-refurbished Victorian bandstand, which sits on a rise above a small pond and arching bridge. As the "I do's" were spoken, joggers and dog walkers passed along pathways around the pond.

(The Plano Community Band performs free summer concerts at Haggard Park. At another park, Oak Point, the annual Plano Balloon Festival takes flight September 17-19, 2004.)

Haggard Park also boasts the trackside Interurban Railway Station Museum. The restored depot remains the only Texas Electric Railway station between Denison and Waco. Displays chronicle the 1908 building's life as a passenger station and electrical sub-station where alternating current was converted to direct current for train use.

Next to the museum, I hopped aboard Rail Car #360. Built in 1911, it's the electric railway's last surviving postal car. The car's original bins, sorting tables, slots, and bags depict how clerks once processed mail while rolling down the rails.

### **Fast Wheels, Slow Veggies**

Across 15th Street from Haggard Park, wheels roll--BIG TIME--at two havens for thrill-seeking teenagers and the young at heart.

As I strolled into Custom Scooters, proprietor Larry Collins, his son John, and his mother Marian were showing customers a dizzying array of push, gas-powered, and electric-drive scooters. Larry's eyes lit up as he rolled out the latest offering, an electric-drive bicycle which accelerates up to 20 miles per hour. Larry jumped on the scooter craze when John got a motorized scooter six years ago. Eyeing the market's potential, Larry opened the shop a couple of years later. Now it's the largest in the Southwest.

I found one of the region's largest indoor skateparks a few doors away at Eisenbergs. In 1997 Vicki Eisenberg converted a former lumberyard into 30,000 square feet of halfpipe heaven. On a busy day, some 300 patrons (mostly teenaged boys) hit the ramps and rails to hone their skateboarding, rollerblading, and BMX biking skills. Vicki got hooked on wheels years ago via her speed-loving son. Arlo Eisenberg, now 31 and living in California, won national rollerblading titles in the 1990s. Vicki opened the skatepark in 1997 as a family-friendly, safe place to promote the sport.

Between the two freewheeling establishments, life proceeds at a snail's pace at Georgia's Farmers Market. Last year, Vick and Carmela Woolsey bought the spacious produce stand from long-time owner Georgia Massey (who died this year). The Woolseys carry on the market's reputation for freshness.

"We only sell fresh-ripened produce from the most local sources," Vick said as he sorted bright-red East Texas tomatoes. "Twenty years ago, there were 300 fresh produce stands in the Dallas area. Now there are only 30 of us."

The market also sells local honey, locally-baked whole-grain breads, 135 kinds of nuts and dried fruits, and jars of pickles, salsas, and preserves. The Woolseys even stock farm-fresh eggs and Dr. Peppers made with "real sugar" at the famed West Texas bottling plant in Dublin.

## **Arts on Fire**

DART's downtown Plano stop is a destination station. That means once here, there's plenty for visitors to do...including arts-loving visitors.

In the late 1990s, the city turned a 1938 school gymnasium near Haggard Park into a state-of-the-art performance space. The Courtyard Theater now hosts 300 events a year, including plays of the Plano Repertory and performances of the Plano Symphony.

City creative arts manager Jim Wear toured me through the theater's whimsical lobby (walls resemble a cattle trailer) and into the intimate 325-seat auditorium. "Before the new theater, even before the old gym, this site was a civic auditorium a century ago," Jim noted. "So it's natural we return to the original purpose. There's something significant about maintaining the cultural core of a city."

Helping maintain that core is the ArtCentre of Plano. Founded in 1981 to promote visual and performing arts, the center converted a downtown furniture store and warehouse into an art gallery and 160-seat proscenium theater for local performing groups.

I dawdled in the small but stylish gallery, perusing quirky wood sculptures by Don Schol, art professor at Denton's University of North Texas. ArtCentre executive direct Cliff Redd took me into a back room to view the center's hidden secret, a historic water well.

"Downtown had devastating fires in the late 1800s," Cliff explained, "so the city dug this well for fire emergencies." The city later dug other wells downtown, one of which was uncovered during renovation of a building recently occupied by Dutch Mill Flowers.

## **15th Street Shops**

The ArtCentre and flower shop are among two dozen or so eclectic establishments--antique stores, gift and collectible shops, and family restaurants--found on or near 15th Street.

At Nikki's, owner Nikki Tuttle explained why downtown stays busy. "Our shops carry specialty items you won't find at the malls. We avoid duplicating each other's merchandise, so everybody has their niche. And we offer service with a smile."

After rummaging through several collectible and antique shops, I found something to smile about at Victoria's Doll House. Near the Waddlewumps marionettes and the Brio wooden railway system, I spied a dozen Lee Middleton-brand newborn dolls bundled in bassinets--maternity ward style--behind a picture window.

Near 15th and Avenue K, a pleasant sidewalk cafe caught my eye. Tim and Karin Kelly renovated this 1901 hay and feed store and opened Kelly's Eastside last November. Outdoor seating was filled, so I sat inside and marveled at the shiny new pressed-metal ceiling. More marvelous was my hot Reuben sandwich, sinfully followed by chocolate pecan pie, vanilla Blue Bell ice cream, and drizzles of chocolate sauce.

I marveled at the ambiance and food of another popular eatery, Jörg's Cafe Vienna. With red-and-white Austrian flags overhead and a plate of Jägerschitzel, spätzle noodles, and red cabbage before me, I slowly sipped a flavorful, dark Warsteiner beer. Owners Jörg Fercher, an Austrian native, and his wife, Cathy, offer half a dozen German and Austrian beers on tap...plus enough fresh-made schnitzels and strudels to transport you to Europe. Indeed, Jörg said many of his regulars are Europeans living in Dallas who come for a touch of home.

### **Reliving Prairie Life**

My last stop put me in touch with Plano's farming past.

Two miles west of downtown on 15th Street--amid shopping centers and neighborhoods--lies an intact 19th century farmstead.

In 1891, Hunter Farrell (who made a fortune selling gravel to the railroad) built a pretentious home on his 365-acre wheat farm. The farm remained in the family until the 1970s,

when the city preserved the house and original outbuildings on four acres as the Heritage Farmstead Museum. The site interprets life from 1890 to 1920, a pivotal period when farm life gave way to city life.

(April 24, 2005, Plano celebrates that same historical period during the second annual Blackland Prairie Festival, featuring heritage exhibits and demonstrations, entertainment, food, and shopping.)

I strolled in deep shade past the potting shed, root cellar, and smokehouse, then stopped to admire the sheep and goats grazing beside a century-old pole barn. Nearby, volunteer Mac McGrew halted his weeding long enough to show off the small but prolific garden. We surmised when the corn would be ready and how the heat was affecting the tomatoes and beans, then fingered through the basil, dill, oregano, and mint. "These are all heirloom varieties," Mac smiled, "the same as in the 1890s."

Curator Lolisa Moores Franklin guided me through the 14-room farmhouse, set up as if an imaginary Victorian-era family was preparing to attend the 1904 Chicago World's Fair. Trunks rested open, period clothing lay ready for packing, and actual souvenirs from the event sat on display. (The exhibit runs through August 1, 2004.)

Several times a year, Lolisa and staff draw from the museum's 5,000 period artifacts to replicate true-to-life occasions or themes. "We've simulated weddings, back-to-school time, reunions, and even a death in the family," she explained. "We try to make the house seem as if the family will be back any minute."

Before I headed to the car, farmstead executive director Ted Peters told me something about the farmstead, which I later decided applies to historic downtown as well: "The most surprising aspect is that it's in Plano, one of the fastest growing cities in the country."

**RESOURCES**

--re: *Money Magazine*: [http://money.cnn.com/best/bplive/cities\\_table/](http://money.cnn.com/best/bplive/cities_table/)

--Dana Conklin, city/marketing; [danac@plano.gov](mailto:danac@plano.gov)

--re history: [www.planotx.org/history/history.html](http://www.planotx.org/history/history.html)

--re: DART: [www.dart.org/DecemberMissionPlano.asp](http://www.dart.org/DecemberMissionPlano.asp)

--re: water wells: [http://www.planocitynews.com/press\\_releases/2002/pr050602.htm](http://www.planocitynews.com/press_releases/2002/pr050602.htm)

--Cliff Redd, ArtCentre of Plano, [cliffredd@texasinet.net](mailto:cliffredd@texasinet.net)

--Maggie Sprague, Plano Conservancy, Interurban Museum

--Ted Peters, Heritage Farmstead Museum, [museum@airmail.net](mailto:museum@airmail.net)

--Jeff Sparks, Ye Ole Butcher Shop

--Vick Woolsey, Georgia's Farmers Mkt

--Vicki Eisenberg; Eisenberg's Skatepark; [vicki@eisenbergs.com](mailto:vicki@eisenbergs.com)

--Jim Wear, Courtyard Th.; [jimw@plano.gov](mailto:jimw@plano.gov) ; [planocourtyardtheater.com](http://planocourtyardtheater.com)

-- Kelly's Eastside, 1422 Ave. K

--Jörg's Cafe Vienna, 1037 E. 15th St.; [www.cafevienna.us](http://www.cafevienna.us)

--Nikki's, Nikki Tuttle,

--Victoria's Doll House

--Into My Garden Tea Room