

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

TRI-LAKES

3 lakes + 4 towns = a weekend of watersports and charm

Grab your map. Finger across to the northeast Texas area that locals call the *right* corner of the state. Look for the rectangle formed by Interstate 30, U.S. 271, and Texas highways 11 and 37. Four historic towns--Mount Vernon, Mt. Pleasant, Pittsburg, and Winnsboro--pinpoint the corners.

Inside the roadway rectangle lies a 15,000-acre lake with three names. Actually, it's three lakes in one--Cypress Springs, Bob Sandlin, and Monticello. Sometimes called the Tri-Lakes, their recreational "lake things" complement the "town things" of the quaint quartet of communities.

In fact, my ramblings around Tri-Lakes country turn up more than a weekend's worth of watery fun, shopping, dining, B&B lodging, and historical browsing...not to mention precious pottery, classic cars, spicy sausage, down-home music, an offbeat flying machine, and undoubtedly Texas' largest bust of a poultry tycoon!

During the 1970s, dams on Big Cypress Creek created Lake Cypress Springs and Lake Bob Sandlin. A third dam--on Blundell Creek, a Big Cypress tributary--formed Lake Monticello. From the air, the three look like one lake. They supply water to area cities and a TXU Energy power plant.

More importantly for visitors, they comprise a recreational haven for boaters, anglers, swimmers, hikers, and campers.

In winter, anglers ply TXU's Lake Monticello, where waters warmed by the power plant keep fish biting year-round.

In summer, outdoor types (especially from Dallas, just two hours away) gravitate to Lake Bob Sandlin State Park. This 640-acre facility on the wooded north shore features picnic areas, screened shelters, camping, RV hook-ups, boat ramp, and fishing pier.

The FM 21 bridge spans Bob Sandlin at the state park, forming a watersports dividing line. Fishing dominates west of the bridge, where black bass, crappie, and catfish hide around submerged trees. Deeper water east of the bridge offers boaters and skiers seven miles of clear sailing.

Westernmost of the Tri-Lakes, cove-covered Lake Cypress Springs stretches less than eight miles but sports more than 42 miles of shore. Four of Franklin County Water District's five camping parks (Over Look, Walleye, Twin Oaks, and Jack Guthrie--the fifth is Dogwood) cluster along coves on the north shore.

Walleye is my favorite. Campers lounge beside RVs and screened shelters a stone's throw from the water. Sun-bathers and jet-skiers unwind and wind up (respectively) beside a narrow beach. Skiers glide by...taking the occasional splashy nosedive.

Across Whippoorwill Bay from Walleye, I dive into a Cajun-fried catfish sandwich at Tall Tree Marina & Restaurant. Munching an appetizer of Armadillo Eggs (cheese-stuffed jalapeños), I watch ski boats dock at Tall Tree and

swimsuit-clad passengers spill onto the waterside deck for lunch and chit-chat with owners David and Judy Spaht.

Mount Vernon

Life on Cypress Springs' north shore leans toward Mount Vernon.

On the town's quintessentially quaint square, American flags flutter outside antique and specialty shops, and folks relax on a shady plaza beside the 1912 Franklin County Courthouse.

I saunter into M.L. Edwards & Co., a general store-turned-antique emporium. Congenial proprietor (and Mount Vernon ex-mayor) Mike Edwards shows off the wooden display cases and working hand-pull elevator his grandfather installed when he opened the store in 1900. I browse some hardware items, collectibles, and home decor. At the site's Sweete Shoppe bakery, I also sample the mother of all chocolate-meringue pies.

On my way out, I spy an eye-catching collectible--a 1940s Italian-made bumper car used in Branson, Missouri.

I bump into more captivating collectibles on Interstate 30 at Mama Jean's Antiques. Jean Jordan offers quality glassware, mantels, and tiger-oak furniture. But art pottery is her forte, particularly the 80-plus floral-design jardinières, vases, lamps, and tea sets made (1890-1954) in Roseville, Ohio. Priced in the thousands, the museum-quality pieces are out of my league, but still fun to peruse.

Mount Vernon grooves on heritage.

Housed in an 1883 Victorian home (complete with original smokehouse, chicken coop, and barn), the Franklin County Historical Association offers driving maps of 60-plus historic sites.

Included is the county historical museum, housed in a 1940s city hall, one of the nation's last WPA projects. The museum features funky collections of 1880's Victorian bird eggs, 6,000 mounted butterfly species, and 3,000 whimsies (1920s-1940s), hand-carved from single pieces of wood. Also in the guide is the 1894 railroad depot--host of transportation and agricultural exhibits and occasional plays and musical events.

Labor Day weekend, another historic site, the 1868 Thouston [spelling is correct] House, opens as a visitors center a mile or so west of town. (Sept. 1, 2003 dedication events include free lunch and Civil War re-enactors.) Restored to its original turquoise color, the dog-trot house sits near a hiking trail in the new 57-acre Dupree Nature Park. The house boasts two Civil War superlatives.

It was the home of Henry Clay Thouston, a 6-foot, 7-1/2-inch tall colonel said to be the tallest soldier in the Confederacy. It's also on a remnant of the Bankhead Highway, the first southern transcontinental car route. Designated in the 1920s, the highway honored U.S. Sen. John H. Bankhead (1842-1920) of Alabama--known as the "Father of Good Roads," grandfather of famed actress Tallulah Bankhead, and the Senate's last survivor of the Civil War.

Winnsboro

Avid travelers know Winnsboro for its annual fall foliage festival, the Autumn Trails. (Driving tours and events take place throughout October. A key event, the annual Northeast Texas Music Festival, is Oct. 3-5, 2003 at City Park.)

Winnsboro also serves up small-town charm year-round. I find oodles of it at the town's biggest bed and breakfast, Oaklea Mansion.

Local attorney M.D. Carlock built the 22-room, Greek Revival house a century ago. His family lived here until Norma Lee Wilkinson bought and opened it as a B&B in 1997. The elaborately-decorated mansion blends original curly pine woodwork and chandeliers with Norma's collections of Lladró porcelain figurines, Christmas plates, and several hundred rabbits (from paintings and rugs to a four-foot Victorian rabbit).

"I've always been an antique collector and hoped one day to operate a B&B. I feel I was meant to do this," says Norma as she tours me around the manicured four-acre grounds. The wooded site features Koi ponds, dove cotes, water gardens, a Victorian gazebo (popular for weddings), and a stone patio overlooked by a six-bedroom manor house added in 1998. (Group tours are available by reservation. The B&B celebrates its centennial Aug. 9, 2003 with bluegrass and country music on the grounds.)

Up Main Street, R.H. McCrary Co. has been around almost as long as Oaklea Mansion. R.H. McCrary opened his hardware store in 1912. It's still the only hardware store downtown, and it's still in the family.

In the 1990s, owners Robert and Shirley Watters [spelling is correct] added a 1940s soda fountain relocated from near Glen Rose. Shirley cranks out

sodas (chocolate's the favorite) the old-fashioned way, blending Blue Bell ice cream with flavored syrup and carbonated water. She also serves breakfast and lunch and offers a wide range of gift items. I decide on a blue ceramic pie bird.

Down the block, the scrumptious aromas of pies and other fresh-baked goods lure me into Winnsboro Bakery & Cafe. I pull up to a round table and watch two Barbaras (proprietors Barbara Hums and Barbara Richert) turn out everything from old-fashioned apple pie and country breads to their signature sour cream and German chocolate pound cakes.

For lunch, I start with tortilla soup and goat cheese salad, followed by a grilled muffaletta sandwich on focaccia bread. The raspberry tea goes down smooth, as does dessert--buttermilk pecan pie and a frothy latté.

Mt. Pleasant

My sweet tooth not fully satiated, I take a scenic sojourn from Winnsboro--crossing Lake Cypress Springs and Lake Monticello via FM roads 1448, 115, 3007, 2882, and 127--to Laura's Cheesecake in Mt. Pleasant.

Monica and Jeff Walden bought the business in 1995 and moved it from Daingerfield to downtown Mt. Pleasant. The bakery and lunch shop is housed in Antiques and Uniques, a cavernous gift store owned by Monica's mother, Ann Noble. The store is also a stamping and scrapbooking paradise, with hundreds of stamps and scrapbook supplies.

I'm not into scrapbooking, but I *am* into cheesecake. Laura's classic plain cheesecake is the top seller. Flavored varieties include blueberry swirl, Russian lime, apple streusel, and double chocolate brownie torte. I go through the roof

after a taste of the Texas Turtle--layers of rich chocolate fudge brownie and classic cheesecake, topped with caramel and pecans.

Stuffed, I waddle a forgivingly-short three blocks for a taste of musical twang at the Pleasant Jamboree.

In 1988 Burton and Anna Harris converted the 1913 Martin Theater into a country music venue. Anna handled tickets and refreshments, and Burton played guitar for local and area performers. Four years ago, the couple sold the jamboree but remain as managers, with Anna still in the lobby and Burton as emcee and guitarist in the six-piece house band. (Shows are every Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Admission: \$6 adults, free under 10.)

"We're gonna entertain you real good tonight," Burton says as I settle into my theater chair.

Several local singers go through lively country tunes. Then a 12-year-old LeAnn Rimes wannabee comes on in a floor-length, sequined, sleeveless gown. At the lip of the stage, she belts out heart-rending Hank Williams tunes with promising style. She wows the audience.

Maybe it's a guy thing, but I'm wowed later by a little-known Mt. Pleasant attraction, Larry Lawrence Cars & Parts.

I'm in love as I pull up to Larry's Interstate 30 location, which resembles an art deco filling station with vintage signs, gas pumps, and neon lighting. I drool over a sleek black 1941 Cadillac "60 Special" and a fire-engine-red 1965 Mustang fastback.

Larry began selling antique cars and "petroliana" 14 years ago and keeps 10 to 20 project cars on hand, some drivable. He also has 200 undrivable cars to supply his classic car parts business. I spy the cannibalized yet classy carcass of a 1956 Plymouth Savoy and a 1947 Buick Roadmaster, plus countless Cadillacs (1940s-1980s), which comprise Larry's specialty.

Pittsburg

Pittsburg is one of the area's most visitor-friendly towns.

Its homey downtown still boasts laid-back shopping. Mayor D. H. Abernathy--the great, great nephew of town founder Major W. H. Pitts--still gives tour buses a police escort into town. (After half a century on the job, he's the longest-standing mayor in Texas.)

The Carson House Inn & Grille still offers fine cuisine and B&B lodging in Pittsburg's oldest occupied home, built in 1878. (On my visit, the extensive menu makes me see red--tomato-rich roasted poblano soup, mashed red-skin potatoes, and blackened red snapper.)

And Pittsburg remains the birthplace of the Ezekiel Airship (an early flying machine), Pittsburg Hot Links (a unique link sausage), and Pilgrim's Pride (the nation's second-largest poultry producer).

A full-scale replica of the Ezekiel Airship hangs in a new permanent exhibit at the Northeast Texas Rural Heritage Museum. (The exhibit is at the museum's 1901 Cotton Belt depot site, which chronicles area agricultural and transportation heritage.

At another site, the museum's farmstead features a century-old house, barn, and smokehouse, plus a demonstration garden.)

This year is the centennial of the Wright Brothers flight, but Pittsburgers believe the hoopla is a year late.

Eyewitness accounts reveal that, by 1902, a local mechanic and part-time minister named Burrell Cannon had built and test-flown (perhaps only a few feet off the ground) a 21- by 26-foot motorized contraption made of wood, fabric, and wheels. Cannon's design was inspired by Biblical accounts of a flying machine in the Book of Ezekiel.

Enroute to the 1903 St. Louis World's Fair, the airship was blown off a railroad flatcar by a storm in Texarkana and destroyed.

Even earlier than the Ezekiel Airship, hot links were becoming Pittsburg's favorite food.

In 1897, German-American Charlie Hasselback brought his hot link recipe to Camp County. He served the cooked links on heavy market paper. Patrons sat on long wooden benches, downing the spicy sausages drenched in his special hot sauce.

That's still the way they do it at Pittsburg Hot Links Restaurant. Seated shoulder to shoulder with locals, I devour half a dozen links and saltine crackers, washing down the fare with orange-flavored soda pop.

Pittsburg's signature food remains hot links. Its signature face is that of Lonnie "Bo" Pilgrim, founder of Pilgrim's Pride. Bo has even become a national

fixture, appearing in company ads wearing a Pilgrim hat and holding a chicken. (Pittsburg touts its poultry prowess Sept. 20, 2003 at the annual ChickFest.)

The chicken tycoon 's likeness turns heads big-time at one of Texas' most unusual picnic areas, located halfway between Pittsburg and Mt. Pleasant on US 271. In front of Pilgrim's Pride's new frozen-foods distribution center, the picnic area sports an open-air gazebo topped by a 20-foot-high Bo head.

Artist Miley Frost, [spelling is correct] a Texas native now residing in Virginia, created the fiberglass bust of Bo and put it under a colossal Pilgrim's hat that once adorned a Pittsburg eatery called Pilgrim's Place. She also created the gazebo's life-sized bronze statue of Bo reading the Bible with his sidekick chicken, Henrietta, nearby.

After getting jiggy with Bo and Henrietta, I decide to wet my whistle at northeast Texas' only winery and tasting room--Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards. [note: there's no tilde in this spelling]

Two years ago, Californian transplants Jeff and Ana Sneed planted their vineyard, imported wine-making equipment from Italy, and converted an 8,800-square-foot storage building on their farm into a winery and Spanish-style tasting room. The Sneeds even host monthly dinner-entertainment events here. (July 19, 2003 is Moonlight Serenade, featuring live Big Band music and dancing under the stars. August 16, 2003 is the first annual Taste of East Texas Wine & Food Festival, showcasing area restaurants, Texas wineries, and live music.)

On my visit, Los Pinos' fruity flagship varietal, Blanc du Bois, is already sold out. So I try the Red Mesa (85 percent Merlot). Sitting on the winery's vine-

draped deck, overlooking the vineyards, I savor the wine's fruit flavors, smooth tannins, and surprising "kick."

It reminds me of my weekend in the Tri-Lakes area...an experience that proves smooth, with unexpected kicks!

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