

## TEXAS HIGHWAYS—WAXAHACHIE—MALLORY

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

### *Places in the Heart*

#### **Waxahachie's bountiful, beautiful buildings**

How fitting that Robert Benton filmed *Places in the Heart* in his hometown of Waxahachie.

Benton wrote and directed the 1983 movie. He drew on childhood memories for his screenplay (which won an Oscar) about a widow and those who helped save her farm from foreclosure during the Depression. He also staged Waxahachie's myriad historic structures to perfection, lending the film an authentic 1930s look.

Other film makers have discovered this quaint community's "back-in-time" look. Since the 1960s, some 30 movies have been shot here--including Oscar winners *Bonnie and Clyde* (another Benton screenplay), *Tender Mercies*, and *The Trip to Bountiful* (the last two written by Texas playwright-screenwriter Horton Foote).

The town that looks like a movie set has won the heart not only of Hollywood, but also of a steady stream of visitors eager to view its picture-perfect places.

Folks flock to the "Painted Ladies"—the elaborate, colorfully-painted residences and commercial buildings of the Victorian era, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They reflect architectural styles such as Italianate, Gothic Revival,

Eastlake, and Queen Anne. All gussied up in gingerbread trim, they give Waxahachie its signature moniker, “Gingerbread Capital of Texas.”

The term “gingerbread” comes from the culinary trade. For centuries, bakers have decorated cakes made with ginger and molasses into whimsical gingerbread houses. Architecture borrowed the term to describe lavish ornamentation, such as intricately sawn and turned millwork.

This month, the 33rd annual Gingerbread Trail (June 2-3, 2001) serves up a taste of architectural gingerbread on tours of five private residences and several historic buildings.

One tour home embodies some of the finest materials and craftsmanship in town...and well it should. In 1888, cattleman-turned-lumberman William F. Lewis saved the best lumber from his East Texas mills for his two-and-a-half-story Queen Anne residence at 1201 E. Marvin Street. Painted burgundy, yellow, and green, its wraparound porch features fancy posts and spindles. Ornamental brackets bear scrollwork of flower petals, lucky shamrocks, and five-pointed Texas stars.

A year ago, Kathy and David Eriksen bought the house, continuing the restoration process begun by previous owners. Like so many Waxahachians, they're hooked on old homes. “This is our fourth Victorian to restore—two here and two in Dallas,” says Kathy. “It’s like living in the middle of history. As we uncover new things about the house, we learn how people lived 100 years ago.”

In 1984, Waxahachie (population 21,000, the seat of Ellis County) uncovered its own treasure trove of architecture and history. The city and a

preservation group, Historic Waxahachie, commissioned a survey of historic buildings. “We were amazed at what we found,” recalls Historic Waxahachie co-founder Becky Kaufman. The survey resulted in the creation of five historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Including structures in those districts—plus those with state and local medallions--Becky estimates that Waxahachie boasts more than 250 buildings designated as historic.

### **The Tours to Bountiful**

Waxahachie’s largest single visitor event remains the annual Scarborough Faire Renaissance Festival. Replete with costumed entertainers, jousters, and hearty food and drink, the festival (which runs weekends through June 3, 2001) celebrates the merriment of 16<sup>th</sup> century England.

But when it comes to year-round attractions, Waxahachie relies on its Victorian heritage.

To showcase local history and architecture, Historic Waxahachie produced a detailed walking tour and two driving tours, complete with street signs guiding the driving tours.

Grande dame of both driving and walking tours is the Ellis County Courthouse, one of the most recognizable of Texas’ many historic courthouses. Designed by noted architect J. Riely Gordon, the cathedral-like Richardsonian Romanesque structure is built of Burnett County red granite and Pecos red sandstone and features delicately-carved sculptures.

According to a colorful legend, one of the stonemasons, an Italian named Harry Hurley, fell in love with the town’s telegraph operator, Mabel Frame. When

Mabel's mom squashed the romance, Harry began sculpting faces on the courthouse that were less cherubic and more demonic. Local courthouse historian Marcus Hickerson says that heart-broken Harry even carved his likeness and that of Mabel over the west entrance.

Another stop on the self-paced walking tour is the Rogers Hotel, named after town founder Emery W. Rogers, who built the first hotel on this site in 1856. It burned, as did a second hotel here. The current Rogers Hotel was built in 1912 of dark mottled brick and Bedford stone...guaranteed by architect C.D. Hill to be "absolutely fire proof." The hotel housed traveling businessmen and even featured sample rooms where visiting buyers could examine local cotton.

In 1917 and 1918, baseball fans swamped the Rogers, where the Detroit Tigers and star hitter Ty Cobb stayed while in town during spring training. Two other teams—the 1919 Cincinnati Reds and the 1920 Chicago White Sox—stayed at the Rogers during spring training.

During the recent renovation, owner Anthony Cimino tried to modernize while maintaining the character of the hotel's 27 rooms, lobby, and antique elevator. "We've given the place the flair of 1912 with the conveniences of 2001," he says.

Another prominent stop on the downtown walking tour is the three-story Ellis County Museum, filled with county-wide historical exhibits. It's housed in an Italianate-style building designed for a mercantile store downstairs, professional offices on the second floor, and a Masonic Lodge Hall on the third floor. Painted

a striking red, green, and tan, the gingerbread-laden structure remains little changed from when it was built in 1889.

Near the museum, the tour passes a cluster of antique and gift shops in historic quarters.

In the early 1990s, the 1921 Harbin Building became one of the first Waxahachie's to house antiques. Today, Hilda Carpenter owns the Gingerbread Antique Mall where her father, James Harbin, once ran a paint and body shop for his car dealership across the street. The upstairs served variously as a roller-skating rink, a wrestling arena, and the Columbian Club, which engaged notable acts, including Lawrence Welk whose orchestra played here in 1934.

Up College Street, the 1913 Moore Hardware Building still sports its original decorative metal cornice and awnings. Inside, The Dove's Nest combines an antique and gift shop with a popular lunchtime eatery. Cindy and Andrew Burch run the shop which Cindy's mother, Marilyn Goss Harris, started 13 years ago. In the restaurant, they use recipes from Cindy's *The Dove's Nest Restaurant Cookbook*, winner of the 1996 *Writer's Digest* Self-Published Book Award. Typical fare includes the likes of chicken apricot salad, portobello mushroom sandwiches, and chicken pie served in a flower pot—plus homemade pies, cakes and cobblers.

On Franklin Street, the walking tour passes the 1902 E.S. Campbell Building. Painted bright red, yellow, and blue, it features fanciful brickwork. But what catches the eye is its show window, containing a giant Ferris Wheel, Eiffel

Tower, and windmill made of toothpicks and Elmer's glue by the late Venzil Zastoupil.

For 14 years, Bruce and Julie Webb have collected such fantastic folk art, particularly in Texas. In 1994 they opened Webb Gallery. The Webbs display and sell works by self-taught artists—such as the pottery of Waxahachie High School art teacher Carl Block, including his signature face jugs, and the metal sculptures of Ellis County's David Strickland, known as "The Junk Man" because he makes art from old farm implements.

Historic Waxahachie's west-end driving tour heads west on Main Street past the town's four bed and breakfast operations--the Rosemary Mansion, the Harrison B&B, the Caska House and Hemingway's Retreat, and the BonnyNook Inn. It also skirts by two Neoclassical stalwarts: the 1904 Nicholas P. Sims Library (featuring an original lyceum lecture hall) and the Ellis County Art Museum (built in 1916 as the First Presbyterian Church).

At the west end of Main, the tour travels by Getzendaner Memorial Park, home of the rare 1902 Chautauqua Auditorium. (See page XX for more on the Chautauqua.)

Other tour vestiges of the past include: the 1887 St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the city's earliest example of Gothic Revival style; the 1888 Old Ellis County Jail (now a private business); the former campus of Trinity University (now in San Antonio), built in 1902 and now the Southwestern Assemblies of God University; Wyatt Street Shotgun Houses Historic District (currently under restoration); and the 1911 Ferris Ward School (now a school administration

building), which won the Texas Historical Commission's 1990 Karr Award for architectural excellence.

Even in death, the tours show, Waxahachians have historically craved stylish digs. Elaborate marble angels and lambs, Greek columns, crypts, and cast iron fencing adorn the much-photographed Waxahachie City Cemetery, which dates from the 1850s.

### **Tender Mercies**

Why such a bounty of beautiful places? In two words: railroads and cotton.

The arrival of railroads in the 1870s, plus an influx of immigrant Southern farmers, changed the land from cattle range to cotton fields. By the early 1900s, Ellis County was one of America's leading cotton producers. Agricultural riches translated into a wealth of elegant homes and fine commercial buildings.

The Depression of the 1930s staggered the local economy, which remained flat for decades. Ironically, the prolonged slump set the stage for the current surge in historic restoration, notes Shannon Simpson, curator of the Ellis County Museum. "People couldn't afford new houses, so they just kept up the old ones. And slow growth allowed our downtown to remain in tact."

Just as the characters in Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* pulled together to save a farmstead, so have preservation-minded Waxahachians pulled together to save their town's architectural treasures...and continue to do so.

"We still have lots of homes and buildings that could be beautifully restored," reminds Historic Waxahachie's Becky Kaufman.

That ongoing passion for preservation promises to keep these special places where they belong--in the hearts of locals and visitors alike--for a very long time.

*Suggested writer's info:*

In next month's issue, Tyler photojournalist Randy Mallory takes a look at Texas' crape myrtle cities, including Waxahachie.