

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

Winnsboro Autumn Trails

During the mid-19th century, John E. Winn came to a crossroads in what's now northeastern Wood County. He liked what he saw—flowing springs, tall grasses, and forests of pine, oak, and hickory...trees that turned fiery colors in the fall.

Winn and his son-in-law, W.R. McMillan, bought 351 acres at the crossroads. In 1854, they built a mercantile store with a gallery across the front and a large sign (with a misspelling) on top declaring, "CHEP Cash Store." The entrepreneurs sold lots for businesses and homes, and a village sprang up. It was called Crossroads...but not for long.

To honor the settlement's founder, residents renamed the place Winnsborough in 1855 when they opened a post office. The local newspaper shortened the name in 1878 to Winsboro, making it easier to typeset across the paper's front-page nameplate, explains town historian Bill Jones. In 1889, the postal service changed the spelling again--Winnsboro.

Once the railroad arrived in the 1870s, Winnsboro became a shipping center for cotton and corn. The local economy got another boost in the 1940s when oil was discovered. During the 1990s, the town attracted new settlers--retirees drawn by a laid-back country lifestyle and nearby recreational lakes.

Throughout 2004, the quaint burg has celebrated its 150th birthday. Year-long sesquicentennial events culminate this month with Winnsboro's 46th annual Autumn Trails. Each year, locals and out-of-towners gather for a bevy of activities—from a queen's pageant and parade to a tractor show and rodeo. (See *Essentials* for a

complete list.)

But the festival's star attraction remains the colorful fall foliage that, on a good year, rivals the Technicolor splashes of New England. Three designated driving tours start at City Park and wind north, south, and east of town. On the tours, tree watchers lollygag along pastoral drives all month long...and beyond. Many years, the best fall color actually occurs in November.

Tour #1

Driving Tour #1 is the original Autumn Trails. Organizers laid it out in 1958 so locals and visitors could enjoy scenery by car or horseback. The first festival proved so popular that two additional tours soon were added. Over the years, the event's annual horseback trail ride has featured as many as 6,000 riders. The annual Big Woods Trail Ride (October 17, 2004) still passes along Tour #1, which heads southeast from town and zigzags for 35 miles. Even by car, a true tree watcher's pace requires two hours for the tour.

Soak up the look and feel of old-time religion along FM 852 at the community of Perryville, where the Perryville Methodist Church embodies the quintessential little chapel in the woods. The church was organized in 1879. Its current building, built in 1915, boasts a picturesque steeple and clapboard walls. The church's stark white exterior contrasts dramatically with orange-tinted oaks and scarlet-red sweetgums surrounding it and an adjacent cemetery. Another historic church, the 1908 Perryville Baptist Church, lies just down the road. Both churches bear state historical markers.

On FM 852 also find Bent Pine Gallery, so named for an oddly-crooked tree on the bucolic acres of artist Georgia Lange. Stoneware jewelry and pottery remain Georgia's tour de force. Most unique are her pendants, earrings, and pots made by impressing

found leaves and snippets of her grandmother's lace into clay, then firing and glazing them.

Tour #1 climbs a long grade along County Road 4560. In places, the narrow oil top cuts 10 feet or more into red clay hillsides...the characteristic look of an old road.

Early roads were mere dirt trails through the woods. A key eastbound trail from Winnsboro—no longer visible--cut through this area and allowed farmers to haul wagonloads of cotton to Jefferson where steamboats floated the product to distant markets. Even with the advent of automobile travel in the early 1900s, the entire county still had only 49 miles of paved roads in 1922. Dirt roads remained the norm until after World War II, explains historian Bill Jones.

The tour's CR 4560 reaches the highest point in the county (elevation 630 feet) near where yellow-leafed sweetgum saplings grow up through the rusting cab of an abandoned log truck. Nearby sits a small, sun-bleached barn set in a flurry of fall color.

At two spots—Stivers Lookout and Cater's Lookout—Tour #1 offers pleasant vistas before returning to Winnsboro.

Tour #2

On its way south from town along TX 37, the 30-mile-long Tour #2 passes the estate of the late DeWitt and Rhea Carlock. The prominent couple was among Autumn Trails organizers who created the festival as a way to enjoy natural beauty and boost local tourism. The Carlocks' 1903 Greek Revival home is now Oaklea Mansion, Winnsboro's grandest bed and breakfast, open for tours during Autumn Trails. (Winnsboro has two other B&Bs--Thee Hubbell House and the Olde Victorian.)

Oaklea innkeeper Norma Wilkinson manicures the four-acre grounds with shaded walking trails, sitting areas, gazebo, fountains, and Koi ponds. The 22-room mansion's

interior is replete with antiques and Norma's collection of Rabbit Clauses and Santa Clauses.

For a bite before touring, home-style country cooking awaits two miles south on TX 37 at Lou's Country Inn. Housed in a bright blue Victorian home, Lou's buffet lunch features varied entrees, fresh vegetables, and homemade breads and desserts like grandma makes.

The tour veers off TX 37 onto CR 4890 and passes Lake Winnsboro, a 1,100-acre reservoir impounded in 1963. Bass anglers come here in fall, winter, and spring for high-catch rates as much as trophy fish—although the lake surrendered a record 10-plus pound largemouth bass this spring. A small park offers lakeside views and picnic areas.

Expect a picturesque jaunt along the tour's FM 2088, which doubles as one leg of the Texas Forest Trail, the state-designated driving route that rambles through 35 East Texas counties.

Ponder gold on FM 2088 at Captain Henry Stout Roadside Park. Legend holds that a group of Americans stole a "nine-mule load of gold" in the early 1800s from a Mexican army payroll. They reportedly buried it three miles north of here at the community of Stout, named for early settler and lumber mill owner Captain Henry Stout. A historical marker at the park tells the Stout story.

Buried gold or not, look for leafy gold on oaks and elms along county roads 2869 and 4636 through an area locals call the "Big Woods." This area once sported as many as 30 lumber mills, notes historian Jones. By 1910, the virgin forests were depleted, though logging remained part of the local economy.

Tour #3

Tour # 3 exits Winnsboro headed north on TX 37 and circles through southwestern Franklin County.

Just before the 24-mile-long tour turns from TX 37 onto FM 900, relaxation flows clear and cold at a roadside park developed in the 1930s by the state highway department. Artesian spring water pours from a pipe set in rock. Though the water is not officially approved for drinking, locals bring plastic jugs here and tank up for home use. The site features stone picnic tables, rock walls, and an abandoned “wishing well” that once held goldfish.

Tour #3 skirts down FM 115 across the westernmost reach of 3,400-acre Lake Cypress Springs near Cypress Creek Country Club, which features a nine-hole golf course open to the public.

FM 115 continues through the community of Scroggins, which grew up in the mid-1800s around a sawmill operated by Milt Scroggins. Grab a cold-cut sandwich and drink at the old-fashioned Scroggins General Store. Or--after a turn from 115 onto TX 11--grab a hot sliced beef sandwich and potato salad at Dwain's Barbecue Place. The roadside eatery is across TX 11 from the abandoned community of Chalybeate Springs, pinpointed by a historical marker. Named for the high iron content of a local artesian spring, it was a thriving resort community in the 1880s. It had a two-story hotel and health spa, where visitors drank and bathed in the chalybeate water. The resort lasted a decade or so, and the village—which once had churches, stores, and a post office—became a ghost town.

Town Touring

In 1909 a Winnsboro resident, appropriately named Mel Wheeler, became the first local owner of a passenger automobile. The new contraption scared both horses and

people, according to a short historical account written in the 1950s by local judge, Will D. Suiter. “About the only road on which this car could be operated was (a) stretch of Main Street approximately one mile in length,” Suiter wrote in *Winnsboro, Texas—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, reissued last year for Winnsboro’s sesquicentennial. “Young men and women would crowd this car and take the short ride that could be made.”

Admire--but don’t hop on—the dozens of antique cars parading through town during the festival’s annual Antique Car Rally, October 23-24. Sponsored by the Autumn Trails Model A Ford Club, the rally’s downtown parade and countryside tour has drawn as many as 200 antique cars from several states.

In between tour drives, stretch your legs on a short walking tour of downtown Winnsboro.

Begin where Main Street crosses the railroad tracks at the Depot Museum. The 1908 Louisiana & Arkansas (Kansas City Southern) depot originally faced the tracks. The Winnsboro Heritage Society rotated it 180 degrees in the 1980s when the group saved the structure from demolition. The interior features a rail office sandwiched between separate waiting rooms for white and black patrons. The space now displays local history artifacts and railroad memorabilia.

Across Broadway Street from the depot, drop by the Trails Country Center for the Arts, site of periodic art exhibits and musical and theatrical performances. The small center faces Market Street, built in the 1890s. The street was later known as the Bowery, because of its ample saloons and gambling halls, complete with frequent shoot-outs. Winnsboro was a favorite stopover for the notorious bandits Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.

One block west, Main Street is home to R.H. McCrary Company. The hardware store and soda fountain has been in business under the same family ownership since 1912. It once housed an undertaker's operation upstairs. The old-fashioned hardware emporium—creaky floors and all--added a soda fountain and gift boutique in 1990.

Just down Main Street, Winnsboro Bakery & Cafe can further assuage your cravings. Breakfast items—such as cinnamon rolls, muffins, scones, and fruit-filled nut rolls—go fast. Come early to beat the lunch rush for soups, salads, and deli sandwich on fresh-baked breads...not to mention lush desserts from Italian cream cake to mocha pecan pie.

But don't worry if every seat's taken. Just get a slice of old-fashioned apple pie and a cappuccino to go. Then head out in crisp fall air for a leaf lover's look at nature's glory along the Winnsboro Autumn Trails.

RESOURCES: (903)

•RE: history:

Bill Jones

•RE: events: Debbie Lyn Foster, chamber

•Patty Burke, Trails Country Center for the Arts

•Georgia Lange, Bent Pine Gallery

•RE: antique car show: Jim Stephens or John Burke

•RE: history:

Winnsboro, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Will D. Suiter, Grayford Jones Press, 1952 (supplied by mayor, reprinted 2003)—photocopy attached

•RE: Winnsboro History:

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/WW/hgw13.html>

•RE: Perryville

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/PP/hnp19.html>

[http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/Atlas/....for Perryville Meth. Church](http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/Atlas/....for%20Perryville%20Meth.%20Church)

•RE: L. Winnsboro

http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fish/infish/lakes/winnboro/lake_id.htm

•RE: Stout

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/SS/hns93.html>

•RE: # miles of roads

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/WW/hcw15.html>

•RE: Scroggins

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/SS/hls32.html>

•RE: elevation

Texas Almanac