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OF TEXAS

Back to Nature

DECEMBER 2020

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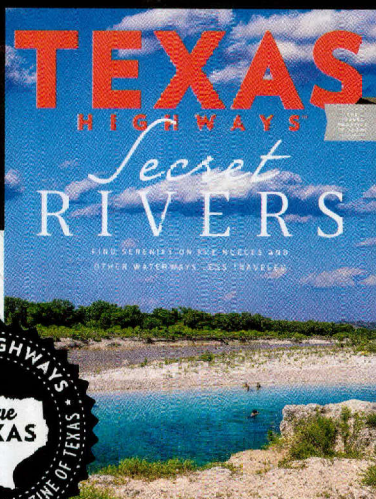
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EDITOR'S
NOTE

Caprock Canyons State Park, 100 miles southeast of Amarillo, has seen a steady stream of visitors throughout the year due to the ongoing pandemic.



The Promised Land

With fall in full swing and temperatures finally lowering, it's the perfect time to explore the bounty of landscapes we're lucky to enjoy in Texas. While we've all had our share of disappointment over disrupted plans and vacations in 2020, spending time in nature has been a balm to our weary souls. It's no surprise that Texans are opting to spend more time outdoors this year.

In complementary feature stories, writers Clayton Maxwell and Asher Elbein embark on journeys through Texas' private and public lands, respectively, to highlight the diversity of outdoor options and the benefits of communing with nature. Both stories offer recommendations and tips for where and how to safely experience Texas' natural treasures.

This issue also includes a partnership with *Stranger's Guide*, a quarterly magazine devoted to exploring destinations around the globe. Its special Texas edition is available at shop.strangersguide.com. For our joint feature story, writer-at-large Sarah Hepola visited Corsicana a half-dozen times over

For more exclusive content from our *Stranger's Guide* partnership and a special subscription offer, visit texashighways.com/strangersguide

three months to deliver a nuanced portrait of the town that has captured the country's imagination since *Cheer* debuted on Netflix in January. Sarah said she found herself charmed by the city she had previously bypassed on many road trips from her native Dallas. "The pandemic has made me more curious about the places nearby," she says. "It's one of the unexpected gifts of being forced to sit in place for so long. You start to really notice what's around you."

While the holiday season is certain to be different for many of us this year, I hope the slower pace offers surprising rewards and deep breaths of fresh air.

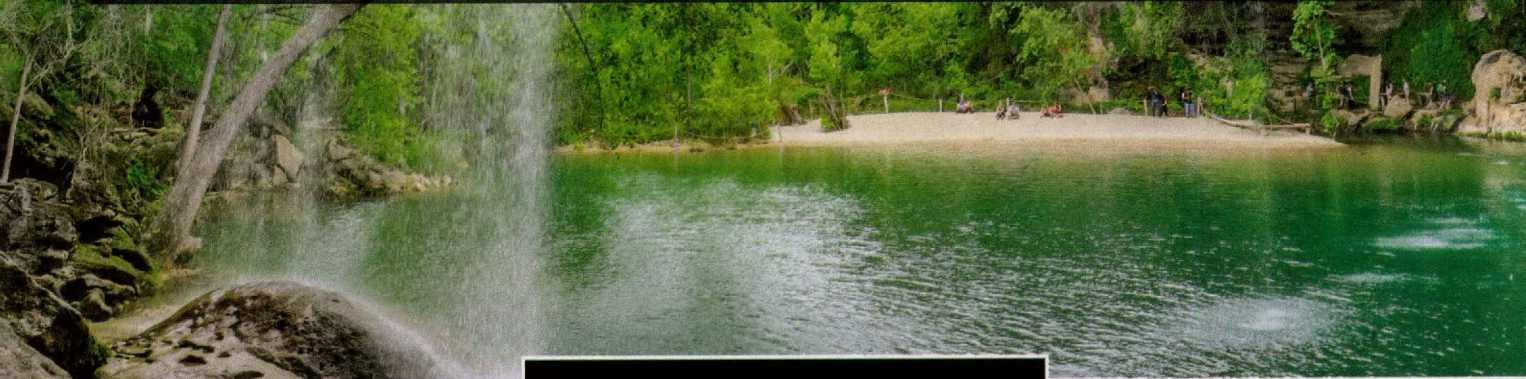
EMILY ROBERTS STONE
EDITOR IN CHIEF



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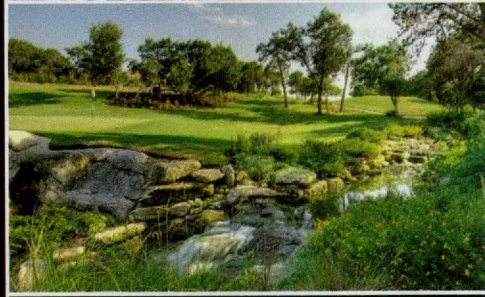
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This Land Is Your Land

Nearly all Texas land is privately owned. Land-sharing platforms Explore Ranches and Hipcamp usher guests beyond the fence line to wander wild landscapes.

*By Clayton Maxwell
Photographs by Tom McCarthy Jr.*

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Lights, Camera, Corsicana

Welcome to the reinvigorated Corsicana, whose small-town charm has attracted the film industry and a top-tier artist collective.

*By Sarah Hepola
Photographs by Sean Fitzgerald*

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For Love of the Outdoors

Spending time in nature could be key to maintaining mental and physical health during the pandemic. Texas parks welcome visitors seeking solitude and reflection.

By Asher Elbein



AN AIRSTREAM trailer near Leander is one of the available lodgings on land-sharing platform Hipcamp.



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DECEMBER



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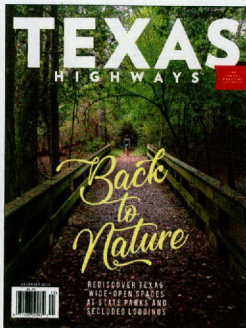
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Photo by Kenny Braun
Shot at Big Thicket National Preserve

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Behind the Story



Contributing editor Melissa Gaskill wouldn't dream of taking one of Big Bend's living rock cacti, but she wasn't surprised to hear about the illegal market for the stolen plants she wrote about in "The Perils of Pilfering Prickly Plants" (Page 22). "Obviously these smugglers were doing this for money," says Gaskill, who has a degree in zoology. "We're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars, and people are buying them all over the world." Gaskill, who is planning her next trip to Big Bend, says she hadn't noticed living rock cacti in her frequent trips west, but that doesn't mean their role in the local environment isn't meaningful. "You have this big ecosystem and a lot of little ecosystems in it," the Austin-based writer says. "If you pull enough pieces out, it's like a Jenga tower. This is just one little block in the Jenga tower for the ecosystem."

Featured Contributors

Regina L. Burns



The multimedia journalist and editor visited Morrow's Barber Shop in Terrell for this month's My Hometown (Page 12). "This is the spot if you want your sides to hurt with laughter while getting a great haircut," says Burns, who is based in Dallas. In addition to magazines, she has worked for radio and TV stations, newspapers, and *The Associated Press*, in Mississippi and Texas. She contributed an essay to the book *Embracing the Real World: The Black Woman's Guide to Life After College*. Burns is the owner and marketing project manager at her boutique agency, Harvest Reapers Communications.

Lucas Loredo



For "An Ancient Voice" (Page 14), the Austin-based writer spent time with some of the state's historic live oak trees searching for relief from anxiety. "Trees calm me," he says, "and even better if they've been around a long while. There's a special wisdom in their slow-moving growth, and I aimed to find it." Loredo's work has been published in *The Oxford American*, *The Masters Review*, and *The Washington Square Review* and featured by *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Travel Writing*. He holds an M.F.A. from the Michener Center for Writers.

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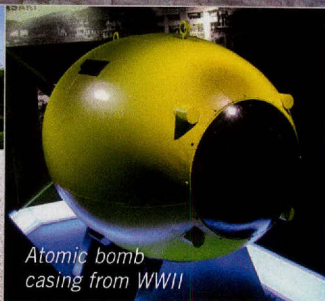
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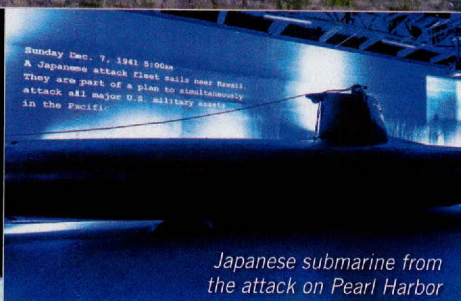
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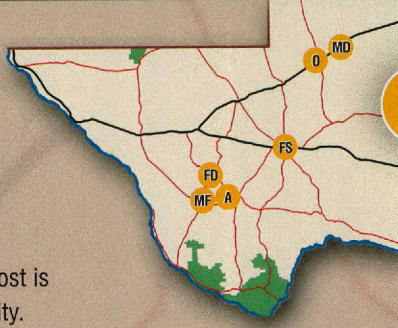
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MD

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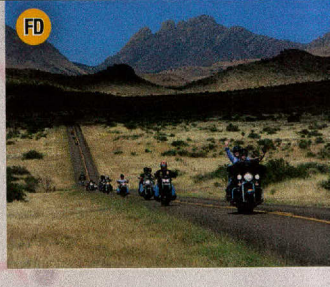
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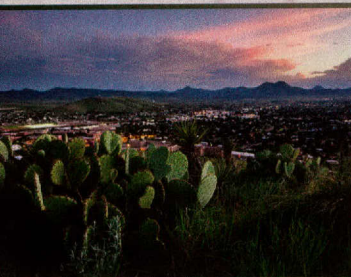
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MF

MERGE



The article by Roberto José Andrade Franco was one of the most moving and beautiful articles I've had the pleasure of reading in *Texas Highways*. I'm not an emotional person, but I had tears in my eyes when I finished reading. Thank you for your excellent magazine.

Ves Box, Clifton

Picture Perfect

Images, I have read, speak to the heart, and one in the November 2020 issue brings tears to my eyes. The boy standing next to his mom is only four years older than me ["Editor's Note: Texas Tough"]. I can't imagine what could go through his mind if he is viewing this picture today. I hope he would notice that his mom is smiling. I grew up poor in Ohio, but nothing like the poorness captured in this image. Texas tough, sure, and species tough, too.

Larry Reed, Bolingbrook, Illinois

Hometown Heroes

We just finished reading the entire November issue and it is great! All the stories were well written and were so interesting. Loved seeing our hometown of San Augustine featured with our very

outstanding citizen, Betty Oglesbee. The story about Bernard Harris Jr.'s quest to be part of the space program was magnificent ["One Giant Leap of Faith"].

Neal and Clara Murphy, San Augustine

Cup of Joe

I enjoyed "Tales of Texas Grit" [November], but I cannot imagine the Texans fighting the Trinity flood of 1916 asked for a cup of "joe." That term for coffee wasn't in general use until the 1930s.

Rowland Foster, Anson

History Buffs

I have been a loyal subscriber to your publication for almost 30 years. This November issue may be the best yet, simply for all of the history packed inside. When my family and I moved to Dallas in 1989, I started our subscription to your

magazine. Each issue usually had at least one page of Texas history. That faded over the years, but this issue makes up for that lack. *Texas Highways* magazine has taken me and my family to many wonderful places in our state. Thank you so much for an outstanding publication.

Lucy Somes, Dallas

Stay in Your Lane

I recently received my November issue of *Texas Highways*. I was disappointed at the lack of travel content in the issue. I buy *Texas Highways* for the beautiful pictures of Texas and insights and hints on places to go and things to do. The fact that we can't go right now is irrelevant to me. We can plan and dream. Please get back to what you were designed to do and what you do best: Texas travel!

Tom Pesek, Houston

Fighting Fire

My husband was in charge of the Texas Forest Service fire prevention service for many years ["On Call," October]. Hats off to E. Dan Klepper and all of the volunteer fire organizations in Texas!

Lisa Nicklow, Salem, Massachusetts

The Lomax Brothers

These guys are American heroes ["Song Hunters," October]. Without them we might have lost a treasure trove of music.

Judith Nelson Flaherty, Dallas

Pecan Heaven

Best chocolate pecan pie ever at Berdoll's ["Deep Roots," October]! Miss Pearl is the best attraction to take pics with!

@texan65





Waiting for the Sun

At Big Bend National Park, the Santa Elena Canyon Trail climbs a series of switchbacks into the mouth of the famed gorge. Most hikers come to admire the sheer limestone walls, which rise 1,000 feet from the Rio Grande. But the return hike offers a strikingly different view of the river as it bends through the desert with the Chisos Mountains in the distance. "I am continually drawn to Big Bend because of the grand, rugged beauty," says photographer Rob Greebon, who took this photo one early morning in November 2019. "The remoteness of the area, and the beauty and life that thrive in this harsh landscape, amazes me."



Terrell

Take a seat with retired barber Edmund Morrow for a trim and the talk of the town

By Regina L. Burns



Now retired, Edmund Morrow only cuts hair by special request at the still-bustling barber shop he opened with his father in 1972.

Terrell might be best known for the Terrell State Hospital, a 135-year-old psychiatric ward. Or, as the home of the No. 1 British Flying Training School Museum, which tells the history of the local academy for Royal Air Force pilots during World War II. And, of course, as the hometown of Jamie Foxx, the Grammy and Oscar winner who graduated from Terrell High School. But some visitors know Terrell for a different reason: Morrow's Barber Shop. Customers travel from as far away as Mexia (85 miles south) for a haircut, a little joshing, and the latest "facts" from barber Edmund Morrow. A Vietnam War veteran, the 77-year-old has cut hair for almost 60 years, including at the Terrell State Hospital and at the shop he built in 1972 with his late father, Robert E. Morrow. Both men trained at the famed Tyler Barber College in Dallas, the first African American barber college in the country, and they worked together every weekend for almost three decades. Now retired, Morrow leaves the shop's operation to his son, Rodney Morrow, but he still takes appointments for "special customers."

Segregated Haircuts

"I was a barber at the State Hospital for 20 years. Back when I started [in 1965], it was segregated. We had one Black barber who cut the Black patients' hair. Then another barber and I cut the white patients' hair. There were more white than Black patients out there. Working there helped me keep my life together because I saw what [drugs and alcohol] were doing to them; that made me go straight. When I got drafted, I went to Vietnam in 1968 and then came back to the State Hospital in 1970. The government said if you were drafted from your job, they owed you that job when you got back."

A Family Tradition

"After my dad died, I talked my son, Rodney, into going to barber school because we were going to keep it going—the Morrows' empire. Now I'm retired, and Rodney, who is also a pastor, and another young guy [Marcus Carter] cut hair on the weekend. In a small city, people get haircuts on the weekends. When I say 'retired,' I don't go down there and work for the public. I've got some old guys that I've been doing their haircuts. They have to call me and make an appointment."

Keeping It Classy

"When we cut hair, we focus on quality. We always say, 'Your work speaks for itself.' We got some people who've been to the other shop and want to come in and badmouth the other shop. You cannot come in here and talk negative about nobody. We run a respectable shop, and we have customers come from 50 miles around. I got people come from as far away as Mexia, Commerce, Roys City, Dallas,

Garland, and Arlington. People can talk about whatever in the shop, but it's got to always be clean."

Star Quality

"Jamie Foxx used to be our pianist at our church, New Hope Baptist Church, during his senior year in high school. I know his whole family. He went out to California and got on this show *In Living Color* and played Wanda [an outrageous drag character]. He called his grandmother and told her about it, and she told him to go for it. Back in the day, he came to the shop, yes, but he's been gone for a while. I did his granddaddy, too. Jamie was famous here in sports and football. He's always been talented. He comes back to Terrell every now and then."

Eat at Pop's

"I like to eat at Pop's Fried Chicken because it has vegetables and several varieties of meat. You can get homemade pies, iced tea, and chicken, and you can also make your own menu. Everybody knows me. Then my wife and I also like to go to a barbecue place called Smoke Monkey. They have a buffet and homemade pies."

Quiet Home

"I've been around the world, and I still like Terrell. You can get the boy out of the country, but you can't get the country out of the boy. Everybody pretty much knows each other, Black and white. There are a variety of people, different races and nationalities. Terrell is still a nice place." 🐶



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An Ancient Voice

A naturalist looks to Texas' mighty oaks for serenity

By Lucas Loredó

I

It was the last fit of Texas winter. The oaks of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, in Austin, had long since shed their waxy, emerald leaves, and their branches clacked in light wind. Phillip Schulze, the arboretum manager, piloted me on his golf cart through the center's collection of all 53 oak species native to Texas, which boasts the greatest diversity of oak trees in the nation.

"Do this," he said. "Take a room full of people, ask them to close their eyes and remember an important memory from their childhood. Then say, 'Raise your hand if there was a tree present.'" We passed Spanish oak and lacey oak, bur oak and Chisos red. There were post oak and chinkapin. Shumard's. Pin. "You watch," he continued. "More than half, every time." Then he tried it another way: "Ask kids, 'Who likes to climb trees?' All of them. It's natural. Humans like trees. There's a connection."

Schulze wore a Lone Star State T-shirt overlaid with a chambray work top embroidered with the Wildflower Center logo and a ball cap with a neck cape. He nodded to the families we passed along the arboretum trail. Soon the path widened, opened up, and I got my first clear view of what I'd come to the Wildflower Center to see: the Hall of Texas Heroes.

You'd be forgiven if you imagined a row of stodgy historical photos hung along a dreary hallway. This display is nothing like that. Instead, a large circular clearing is populated by the offspring of some of Texas' most storied oaks, those centenarian old-timers under whose shade treaties were signed, battles won and lost, romances set aflame. Now their 28 young children—all live oaks, one of Texas' most enduring and hardy varieties—form concentric circles with a path around their circumference. Here, patrons can move under the still-budding shade of the youthful trees and read plaques about each of the 28 parents.

Schulze pulled the golf cart up alongside a succession of these plaques, telling me about his favorite trees in the collection. That's when I felt a familiar sensation: complete and total panic. A clenching of anxiety. A sense of doom descending upon me. I held on to the cart's grab handle and tried to focus on Schulze's voice. He was telling me how the project started—his arborists gathered hundreds of acorns from the famous oaks and coaxed them to life in the nursery until the heartiest specimens could be separated from the rest and planted in the Hall of Texas Heroes. He said the Founders' Oak in New Braunfels was his favorite for multiple reasons, not least of which is his pride in being a fifth-generation New Braunfelser. But I was finding it hard to concentrate.

I fancy myself an amateur tree enthusiast and have a laminated Central Texas tree identification pamphlet in my glove box. And yet, as much as I had come to the Hall of Texas Heroes to learn more about Texas' most illustrious oaks, I had actually come here looking for something selfish. I was looking for peace.

At that point, I had been suffering from anxiety for 12 long months. A series of concurrent events had brought on this intense, unremitting feeling: the end of a five-year partnership akin to marriage, the failure of a three-year novel project, the end of graduate school, an unexpected move back to my parents' house in Austin as a 29-year-old without a job.

This was part of the reason I was at the arboretum. Nature had always soothed me, and I thought being closer to some of Texas' oldest and most serene trees might lend me some perspective. Some comfort.

The feeling hung around as Schulze drove me to the Wildflower Center's nursery. Here, there were dozens of oak saplings in various stages of growth: one-year, three-year, and five-year trees. Some were an inch high and covered with wire mesh to protect them from squirrels, others tall enough to brush Schulze's knees, and plenty my own height ready for planting.

One tree in a 5-gallon bucket caught my eye. On the container, written in white ink, was the name TREATY OAK. Austin's Treaty Oak—where Stephen F. Austin is said to have signed the eponymous treaty with the Tonkawa and Comanche—has a truly unbelievable claim to fame. In 1989, a disgruntled man hoping to cast a love spell on his methadone counselor performed a ritual poisoning of the 600-year-old oak with enough hardwood herbicide to kill 100 trees. It took the effort of the nation's top arborists—and a blank check from two-time presidential candidate Ross Perot—to save the tree from death. To see the offspring of that fabled oak was like meeting a local celebrity.

"I can't believe you have one," I said.

"I want to plant it at the center of the hall," Schulze replied. "We'll see if they let me."

Schulze bent down and rooted around the base of the young oak and came up

with three acorns in his hand. He placed them in my palm. "Feel that? See? Dense. No weevils got to them yet. Go home, plant them, see if they'll grow."

Nearing San Marcos, about 30 miles

south of Austin, I passed Exxons and Shells advertising unleaded for a buck thirty-three, the lowest I'd seen since I was a boy. By then it was May, and the coronavirus had already hammered the nation and driven folks inside for safety. I'd made a list of eight trees from the Hall of Texas Heroes for a mini-tour of the original oaks in and near Austin, which seemed a fitting way to get back out into the world.

The Log Cabin Oaks and the Kissing Oak, both near the campus of Texas State University in San Marcos, were so close to each other they could've shared messages on the same wind. I parked

in a strip mall—a large, empty lot, with stores either closed for good or boarded up for the time being—and checked my phone's GPS to see if I was close to the Log Cabin Oaks. The Texas A&M Forest Service has a handy website that identifies and locates the state's most hallowed trees, with exact coordinates down to the geographic minute. Following the blue marker on my phone's screen, I came upon an oak with four close-knit trunks and a couple others standing watch nearby, their canopies all touching and root collars nearly suffocated by the lot's pavement. These were the Log Cabin Oaks, where early settlers built a cabin that served as San Marcos' first school and community center.

It was not an auspicious start to my tour. Near the oaks was a long-abandoned establishment whose sign read Colloquium Books. The 'k' was missing from the sign, and the handful of CRT



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televisions mounted from the ceiling tiles inside reminded me of a '90s Blockbuster. Around the live oaks' trunks, an assortment of Taco Bell hot sauce packets, mild, and two packs of Pall Mall Reds, empty. A blue jay picked through a smattering of used wet wipes and then flitted away.

I sat on the abandoned steps of Colloquium Books taking notes, listening to the cheerful quips of the jay nearby. And even here—calm, quiet, in the cover of shade—anxiety was with me.

For those who have never experienced persistent anxiety, please take a moment to imagine riding a roller coaster as it crawls to the top of its most thrilling drop. Up and up you climb, the people below, the buildings below, all shrinking to miniature. Then you are at the pinnacle. There is the moment the car hangs poised over the drop, an interminable anticipation, and then: *Plunge! Scream!* The

absolute thrill of that first second as you go from safety to controlled terror, your stomach levitating inside, your senses confused, elated, terrorized.

Anxiety is that feeling of plunging and terror, but the trick is that the ride does not end. On a normal coaster, you can enjoy the thrill because you see where the track bends back up into safety. But this coaster doesn't ever reach the bottom—it persists in plunging.

The problem for me was this: My anxiety did not seem triggered by external stimuli. It was internal. Biological. Constant. Like a switch inside had been flipped—then broken. If I couldn't find peace while safely taking notes underneath a two-century-old oak, where could I find it?

I walked the two blocks from the Log Cabin Oaks down to the Kissing Oak. In 1857, Sam Houston, then a U.S. senator, gave an address underneath the large

tree, and a few local women had hand stitched a Texas flag and presented Houston with it. After his speech, he gave them each a peck. Thus, the Kissing Oak.

The tree now stands at the edge of Sewell Park, which during the time of my visit was cordoned off with orange temporary fencing due to the pandemic. I sat on a limestone bench on the rim of the canopy's shade. The trunk listed to the side, and one large, gnarled knuckle punched out from the bark. It was not an especially impressive tree. The Log Cabin Oaks weren't either. I knew a dozen bigger, more impressive oaks off the top of my head in Austin alone.

Still, I listened, hoping the old-timer would have some words of wisdom. Because I hadn't stopped riding that coaster. Nearby, a pecan—taller and more talkative with its papery leaves—spoke up. But if it had anything to tell me, I wasn't smart enough to understand.

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The following weekend, I traveled to New Braunfels—Schulze's hometown—where I grabbed a donut and some coffee and made my way to the Church Oak, tucked up alongside Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church. A stone tablet at the tree's base, laid in 1917, tells a nice tale of mass being held under the tree's boughs. That here, "in the dawn of Texas history, stood an Indian village in which one of the early missionaries lingered many days." Texas historical landmarks tend to be light on details of how exactly such Native American villages met their ends.

The tree itself was an impressive cork-screwing of two large branches, evidence of the days when they were younger and nimbler in their search for light. Another branch stretched in the opposite direction so far it almost brushed the stained glass of the sanctuary. The thick bark flowed down in rivulets.

Sitting on the stone bench at the base of the Church Oak, I felt the familiar sensation in my stomach. I must stress this point: It's not a single, discreet plunge, this roller-coaster ride of nervous illness. The descent lasts for one second, then 10. Then past 60 seconds. The sickening feeling continues, travels outward from my stomach. Five minutes stretch to 10. I cannot comprehend how it continues, but it does, and soon I have been plummeting down and down for an entire hour, an entire day, a full week, and that is when a sense of true fear enters. *What if this never ends? What if it follows me wherever I go—forever?*

I didn't stay long. I fired up my hatchback and headed over to Landa Park, where I sought Schulze's favorite hero from the collection: the Founders' Oak. Following my GPS once again toward the tree, I had a few false starts, seeing a handful of likely specimens and wondering if I'd found it. But as soon as I saw the actual tree, there was no doubt. It made the other oaks in the vicinity look like mushrooms around a giant's foot. *Quercus fusiformis*—never had a live oak earned the largesse of its Latinate designation quite like this. Of all the oaks I've admired in my life, the Founders' Oak

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was the most impressive. Its girth was formidable; the trunk's bark seemed to bubble with force, ready to sprout more limbs from its voluminous knuckles at any moment. The massive trunk split into three separate growths, two of which were undergirded by thick stone pillars, which the tree looked in the process of consuming. The branches were generous and unconcerned—lilting here, approaching the ground in a deep bend there. The physics of the whole enterprise was outlandish, making leaps of imagination, the intricate counterbalance of branches reaching clear out on the horizon with the weight of an elephant. The hulking mass put me in mind of an extinct land mammal.

It was the type of tree a child might flock to and then disappear inside of, leaving behind only the rippling folds of trunk and a single red shoe.

I found a bench underneath the generous canopy and pondered the tree a while. A nearby plaque dated the tree to 1700. So, 300-plus years of human life had passed under this same shade, had ruminated upon this same trunk, had heard these same branches channeling the wind's voice. There were families on picnic blankets nearby, peals of laughter; ducks and birds—an alive place for a tree deep, deep into a lifespan few of us can comprehend.

I won't bore the reader with the entire litany of actions I have taken to alleviate my illness, but here is a condensed version to keep in good faith: therapy, meditation, yoga, hikes in nature, medication, journaling, a rigorous sleep schedule, piano, gardening, herbal baths, burning sage, becoming a vegetarian, reaching out to family and friends.

Improvement, yes. Over the months, it's true—improvement. But my nervous system remained burned out, frayed, on the fritz. You don't know self-alienation until you're kneeling in the dirt, sliding a spade into freshly tilled earth—a pittance of rosemary ready for planting—and then feeling yourself surge down that first terrifying drop of roller-coaster track.

Now? you think. *Now, really?* I'm

gardening. It's safe. Where's the danger? Ain't none, and that's the rub. I listened to the Founders' Oak a while, asked it a question. *How do I be still inside?* In response, the massive branches swayed in the breeze. The waxy leaves perked up and chattered their ancient language.

I visited a few more elder statespeople from the Hall of Texas Heroes over the next few weeks, moving quickly, my spirit restless. The Old Evergreen Tree in Giddings on the site of Rocking J Farming Services was an old, impressive oak with ferns growing on its muscular branches. There were three used tires and a rusted cattle hitch under the canopy, and when I made a walk of the trunk, something inside the trailer spooked—it wasn't empty. Inside, a black-and-white pig gave me a look.

Back in Austin I visited the Seiders Oaks, within walking distance from my house along Shoal Creek Boulevard. A motte of trees, their fingers digging into the soil, and one of them bent from youth, likely by Native Americans, humbled next to the creek to mark the water's presence.

The Battle Oaks were next, on the campus of the University of Texas. I sat quietly under the canopy. The bell of the striking clock in the UT Tower sounded the quarter hour. And still that restlessness inside, like I was a bug struggling to free my wing from under the thumb of some mean-spirited child.

A couple months later I visited the Treaty Oak in downtown Austin—the very same oak Schulze had given me acorns from six months prior. (The acorns had failed to sprout, and when I dug them up, I found tidy weevil holes puncturing their bottoms.)

It was June now, the air hot, a year and a half since the infinite plague in my stomach had begun. These days I was feeling a bit better. Not whole, not cured, just better. I'd started listening to

an audiobook called *Hope and Help for Your Nerves*, the main advice of which was to *accept, accept, accept*. Accept the plummeting inside. Do not fear it. Do not run away from it. Let it become a part of you. As it does, it will relinquish its grip.

I made a circle around the tree. Its growth was unusual. The trunk—not quite as massive as the Founders' Oak's, but plenty large—split in a large Y and reached up, up, only for the branches to fall from a soaring height straight downward. They'd long ago been weakened by poison and given in to gravity, reaching all the way down to the freshly cut grass and pooling at the ankles of the mother tree like corded rope. A field mouse spotted me and sprinted into a bush. The nurse tree—a smaller oak brought there by biologists to help the Treaty Oak return to health after it had fallen ill with poison—waited in the parent tree's parlor, giving sustenance. Though it had been saved from death, it still bore the marks of its illness. An enormous portion of the canopy was missing, like a head of broccoli absent a chunk of its florets.

Accepting the plunge. Easier said than done. Still, it was another ingredient in the brew that was slowly nursing me back to health. The heroes had done their slow work on me, too, though not as quickly as I'd wanted. Old wisdom takes time to sink in. What wisdom was it? Being present. Simple as that—presence. A reminder of something I'd forgotten.

Sitting under the shade of the Treaty Oak, wondering what other offerings that massive tree might have for a speck like me, I drifted off to sleep.

In every wood, on the outskirts of every town, on each lonely hilltop, throughout time in every century since people existed, since before people existed and they spoke only to animals, and oftentimes to no one at all, every tree blowing in the wind has said the same sentence.

That's the thought I had.

When I woke up, the wind passed through the branches of the Treaty Oak, and it spoke. Not an answer—an invitation.

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DRIVE



AN UNDERGROUND
market is fueling
the illegal removal
of cacti and other
plants in West Texas.



SOME PARK RANGERS are faced with a new job responsibility: policing plant smugglers.

The Perils of Pilfering Prickly Plants

Big Bend is ground zero in a thriving black market for native plants

By **Melissa Gaskill**

Retired Big Bend National Park biologist Raymond Skiles spent a lot of time hiking the desert and mountains in the 1,252-square-mile park during his tenure. One of his favorite routes followed a ridge near the Rio Grande, where ocotillo dot the rocky limestone and the high ground offers views of the river and Sierra del Carmen mountains. For years, he enjoyed spotting various cacti along the way, including living rock cacti, a small spineless plant that blends in with the rocks. But around 2006, something curious started happening.

“On a walk one evening, I noticed a small pit, maybe 6 inches deep and wide,” Skiles says. “Then another, and another. Then dozens over a few hundred yards. I realized I was no longer seeing any living rock plants. They were all gone. It was clear that someone had walked that route digging them up.”

Those cacti fell victim to smugglers who sell rare plants to collectors in Europe and Asia. Beginning in 2012, multiple federal and state agencies embarked on a years-long investigation resulting in the sentencing of six Texas men. Over the past four years, the men were ordered to pay fines and serve varying terms of probation. Investigators estimate the men removed between 10,000 and 15,000 plants. A single offender made more than \$300,000 and probably shipped several thousand plants in a period of just seven months, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The lure of that kind of money for relatively little effort means more hikers could find scenes like the one Skiles encountered.

“Collecting is a nationwide trend; it’s not just here or isolated,” says Clint Hunt, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department game warden in Alpine. “It’s the money.” The special cacti that grow in Big Bend are popular with collectors around the world—the rarer, the better. And the internet facilitates easy trade. “You see living rocks posted for sale online, and within minutes they sell,” Hunt adds.

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Be a Good Seed

To protect our natural environment, follow these tips to avoid buying illegally collected plants or seeds.

Don't buy plants from sellers in other countries, especially if the plant is not native to that country.

Look for domestic sellers advertising cacti as grown from seed. Find out how long the seller has been in business, since many cacti take years to grow big enough to sell.

Avoid purchasing seeds or plants if the seller can't tell you where they were grown or legally collected.

Nursery-grown plants typically look more symmetrical and have a more vibrant color than wild ones. Scruffy plants may have been illegally collected.



IT TAKES 10 YEARS for a living rock cactus to grow to the size of a half dollar.

Despite the rarity of living rock cacti, no law prohibits selling them in the U.S. The men were convicted for selling them internationally, a violation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. This agreement between governments aims to keep international trade in wild animals and plants from threatening their survival. Removing plants from public land in the U.S. is illegal under state and federal laws, Hunt says, but otherwise these plants are unprotected.

Hunt reports that people also dig up "trailer loads" of yucca and ocotillo in Big Bend Ranch State Park and on private land, and then take them to New Mexico, Arizona, and California. This demand is fueled, in part, by well-intentioned campaigns for drought-tolerant landscaping.

Skiles, too, has witnessed suspicious activity right outside Big Bend National Park, which greeted 450,000 visitors last year. Concerned citizens have also shown him photos of people digging

up plants on the other side of the park's fence and putting them on trailers toting large loads. But since Skiles hasn't witnessed any activity on park land, he's had little recourse. "These are iconic plants in this area," Skiles says. "They don't replace themselves fast enough to sustain that harvesting over the long term."

Park visitors sometimes remove plants from public lands, too. And while taking a single plant may seem mild compared to the thousands smugglers purloin, it augments the problem.

"People think, 'I'm only taking one and I'm a good steward of the land,'" says Karen Little, manager of the environmental lab at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. "But we need to get past that."

While visitors tend to notice only aesthetic changes when plants go missing, the effects have larger consequences. Each plant helps shape its environment, says Texas Parks and Wildlife Department botanist Anna Strong. "Think of it like a Jenga game," she says. "If each

block represents an organism, the blocks around it are affected by its removal. Take out enough blocks and at some point, the tower falls.”

Many animals eat plants, so reducing the number of those plants, or changing where they grow, can leave hungry critters searching fruitlessly for their next meal. Living rock cactus flowers, for example, provide nectar for bees and other insects, Strong points out. Bees are eaten by bears (no kidding), hummingbirds, and dragonflies, and other insects are food for birds, coyotes, and snakes.

Removing a plant also eliminates its future offspring. Cacti in particular often grow for years before they reproduce; living rocks take eight to 10 years. Charlotte Reemts, research and monitoring ecologist for the Nature Conservancy in Texas, points out that some plants see only 1% of their seeds become an adult plant that makes its own seeds.

Despite the rarity of living rock cacti, no law prohibits selling them in the U.S.

“In the harsh environment of the desert, by the time a plant has grown old enough to make seeds, it has run a gauntlet of drought and storms and rabbits and other animals that might eat it,” she says. “Just to get big enough to make seeds is an incredible achievement. You already have only a small fraction that make it, and removing a plant reduces the number of seeds in the population even more. It can get to a point where there aren’t enough plants to replace those that die.”

The Chihuahuan Desert, one of the world’s most biologically rich and diverse

deserts, stretches from southeast Arizona across New Mexico and West Texas and southward over almost 25% of Mexico. Within its vast boundaries grow almost a quarter of the 1,500 known cactus species. Thirty-one percent of those species are threatened, mainly by illegal trade.

Many of these cacti are not commercially available because they grow so slowly. After 10 years, a living rock cactus only reaches about the size of a half dollar, according to Little. People would rather pull a sizeable one from the ground than wait decades for it to grow from a seed.

Reemts understands the desire to have something rare and beautiful, but likens taking a plant to having a private art collection. “You’re the only one who gets to enjoy this beautiful plant,” she says. “Leaving it in place is like having an art museum where it is seen by thousands of people.”



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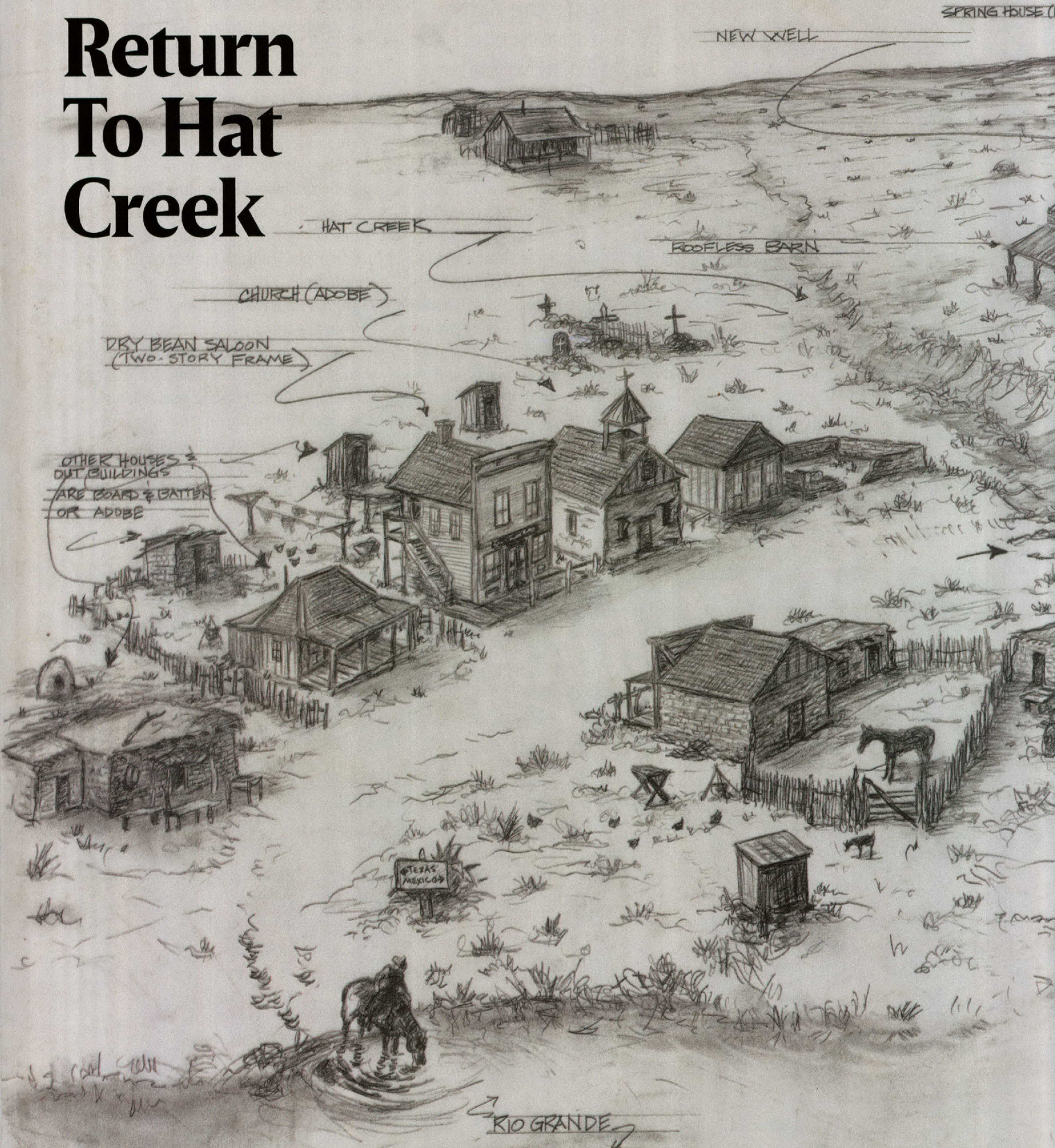
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Return To Hat Creek





A sketch of Lonesome Dove is one of several items on display at the Wittliff Collections Festival

By Clayton Maxwell

Behold the town of Lonesome Dove in its idea phase, before it became the set for the eponymous 1989 miniseries based on the book by Larry McMurtry. Art designer Cary White sketched this drawing in the office of Bill Wittliff, the esteemed Texas photographer and screenwriter for *Lonesome Dove* and various films. The drawing is part of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, a repository of work by writers, songwriters, and photographers, founded by Wittliff in 1987. Today, the collection is one of the country's most respected archives of material on Southwestern culture.

Wittliff passed away in June 2019. In his memory the inaugural Wittliff Collections Festival is scheduled for Jan. 9. The daylong event will take place at the W Hotel in Austin, followed by a gala at the Moody Theater, home to *Austin City Limits*. Panel discussions will feature, among other creatives, writers Lawrence Wright and Stephen Harrigan, photographer Keith Carter, and visual artist Kate Breakey, plus assorted filmmakers and singer-songwriters. A reproduction of White's sketch will be one of many items auctioned off with proceeds benefiting the Wittliff Collections.

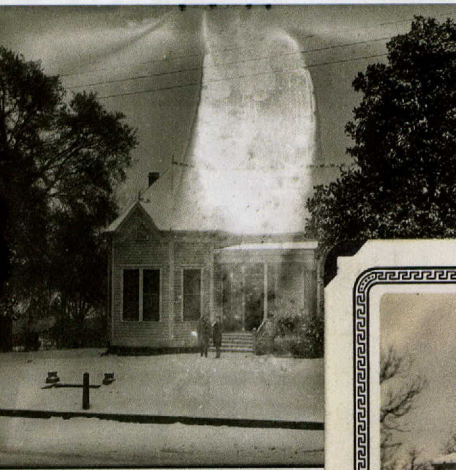
White has thought a lot about this drawing, the original of which is on display in the new *Lonesome Dove* exhibition gallery at the Wittliff. "When we scouted the Rio Grande on the Moody Ranch, outside of Del Rio, we found this perfect spot on our first try, and that's where we built the town," he says, adding that the location was ideally situated on the tip of a bend, which allowed for the river to be seen in almost every shot.

"The one big place where I took some artistic license with McMurtry's story was building a bridge over the arroyo known as Hat Creek," says White, who is currently working on the Paramount TV series *Yellowstone*. "I was amazed that the producers didn't object to the expense of building this bridge because our budget with everything on the show was so tight. I certainly was happy that we did build the bridge because it was such a strong visual element. The cowboys riding across the bridge at sunset is one of the most iconic shots in the show." For more information, visit wittliffcollectionsfestival.com.

I Don't Know If There'll Be Snow

Texas has had a frigid relationship with winter weather

By Julia Jones



The people of Hillsboro, an hour south of Fort Worth, awoke on Dec. 21, 1929, to a sight not often seen in the Lone Star State: flurries of snowflakes hurtling toward the ground and piling up, up, up, reaching historic heights with every drop. In the days prior to the snowstorm, temperatures in the area had steadily reached the 60- to 70-degree range, but then a cold front blew in. By that evening, 26 inches of snow rose from the ground, setting the state record for the most snow in a 24-hour period.

The *Hillsboro Mirror* reported on that day: "Snowfall Has Been Steady and There Are Few Drifts—Traffic is Big Problem—Kids Will Have Big Time." Who could blame them? Anyone who grew up in this state—save for Panhandlers—knows a heavy snow is rare.

According to the March 1930 edition of the American Meteorological Society's *Monthly Weather Review*, "While heavy snows sometimes occur in the south, due to the mixing of cold air with the warm, moist air from the Gulf, from 4 to 8 inches is usually a very heavy fall for a 24-hour period." The rather unexpected deluge in Hillsboro offers a glimmer of hope to our year, which has been one of, if not *the* hottest, on record for planet Earth. Our fingers are crossed for a white Christmas—but this year, let's stick with 4 to 8 inches.



Make Your Own Snow

For snow you can play with, try mixing five parts baking soda with one part white hair conditioner or shaving cream.

For snow you can eat, try making cotton candy. Most recipes call for sugar, corn syrup, water, and salt.

Realistic snow is a bit harder to come by, but filling a power washer with freezing water can do the trick.

-23°F

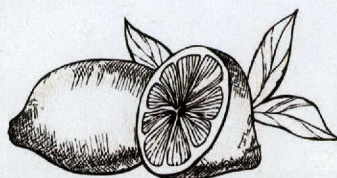
State record for coldest temperature, recorded on a February 1899 morning in Tulia

20

Population of Snow Hill, north of Dallas, from 1940 to 2000

2.75

Texas' average number of days per year with a high of 32 degrees or below, from 2010-14



Sour Consequences

In the Rio Grande Valley, where the characteristic crops are citrus fruits, a rare hard freeze can be disastrous for the industry. According to a 2008 Texas A&M University report, farmers can use methods like wrapping plants in insulating material, installing orchard heaters, and transitioning to alternative irrigation methods to protect their crops—but none of these are foolproof. In the December 1989 freeze that stretched to the Valley, daylong below-freezing temperatures caused the insides of the grapefruits to freeze, ruining much of the rest of the year's crop and resulting in a \$60 million loss. It takes a minimum of three years for an orchard to recover from such a freeze, the last of which occurred in 2011.

Recent Snowfalls in Texas

by Cynthia Drake

Dec. 7-8, 2017

A wintry mix combined with a strong cold front crept across South and Central Texas, depositing an inch of snow in Corpus Christi and 2 inches in Victoria.

Dec. 26-28, 2015

A West Texas blizzard blanketed nearly half the state in snow, devastating cattle and dairy operations in the Panhandle.

Feb. 23-24, 2010

Towns east of I-35 saw widespread snowfall.

Feb. 11-12, 2010

Several inches of snow blanketed the northern half of the state.

Dec. 24-25, 2009

Over a foot of snow fell in many areas between Dallas and Lubbock.

Dec. 24-25, 2004

The Victoria Christmas snowstorm produced 12.5 inches of snow.

HOW TO DRESS FOR A TEXAS WINTER



MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

THIS

LAND

IS



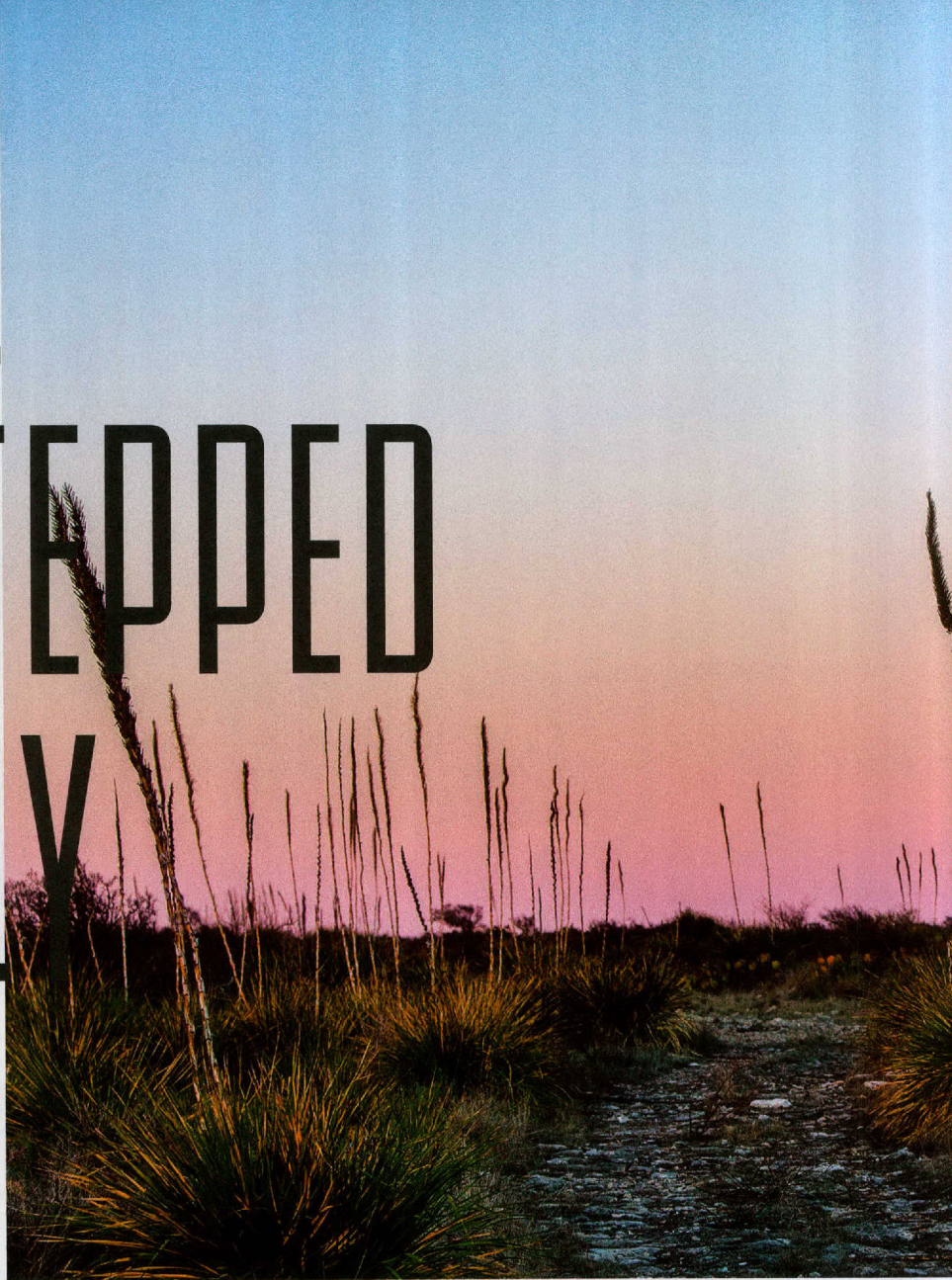
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BY CLAYTON MAXWELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM MCCARTHY JR.

YOUR

LAND

I HAVE SIDESTEPPED PRICKLY PEAR



and creosote to crest a rugged overlook, and my rewards are an endorphin surge and the sight of the turquoise Devils River cleaving the canyon below. While standing on the rocky crag overlooking the Hudspeth River Ranch just north of Comstock, I consider the words of Henry David Thoreau: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” In wildness, I would add, is also the preservation of our sanity. For me, this ranch is a reprieve from a world grappling with a pandemic. Like the winds that carry the buzzards over the river canyon, the wildness here is a thermal uplift for the spirit.

I’ve booked a night at Hudspeth River Ranch via Explore Ranches, an online platform that offers guests overnight stays at

top-tier private ranches in Texas, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. This year, when so many are seeking the solace and freedom of the outdoors due to COVID-19, Explore Ranches has received nine times as many bookings as it did in 2019. Apparently, I’m not the only one craving a little wildness these days.

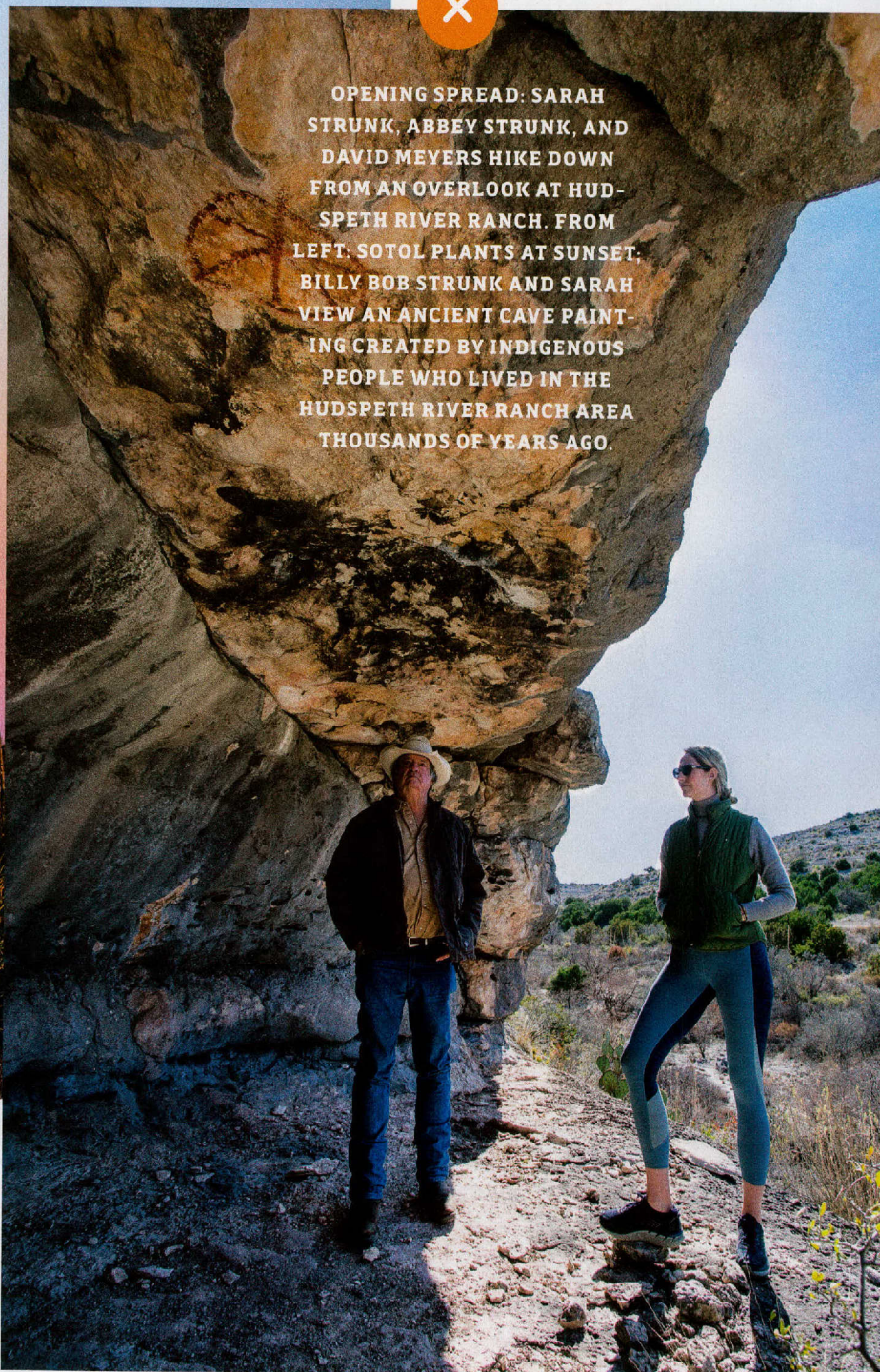
“The mental and physical benefits of just being outdoors for days without connection to our routines and electronics—that’s why we started the business,” says Jay Kleberg, who co-founded Explore Ranches in 2018 with Allison Ryan and Jesse Womack. “We want to give people the opportunity to create some kind of connection to the outdoors and clean air and water, so they fall in love with and want to conserve those places.”

Explore Ranches is on the front wave of a vacation trend called land sharing. The trend is similar to short-term vacation rental, which platforms like Airbnb and Vrbo excel at. Rather than staying in someone’s house in town, you escape to remote locales that sometimes even a GPS can’t find. Explore Ranches’ properties tend to run more expensive due to the size of the accommodations and the various optional amenities. Hipcamp is a good alternative platform for those seeking a more rough-hewn and economical trip. Launched in San Francisco in 2013, Hipcamp offers properties spanning the country, with 3,000 locations in Texas. The accommodations range from campsites and cabins to yurts and RV spots.



Once booked, the platform facilitates a connection with the landowner and handles details.

Both platforms offer options state and national parks can't provide in Texas, where 95.8% of the 268,000 square miles that make up our state is privately owned, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The rest is owned by local, state, and federal governments. It's a stark contrast to Western states with similarly vast terrain: In New Mexico, Arizona, and Wyoming, over 50% of land is government-owned. Unlike these other states, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is almost non-existent in Texas. The only bureau property in Texas is the 12,000-acre Cross Bar Management Area in the Panhandle, which is being



OPENING SPREAD: SARAH STRUNK, ABBEY STRUNK, AND DAVID MEYERS HIKE DOWN FROM AN OVERLOOK AT HUDSPETH RIVER RANCH. FROM LEFT, SOTOL PLANTS AT SUNSET; BILLY BOB STRUNK AND SARAH VIEW AN ANCIENT CAVE PAINTING CREATED BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THE HUDSPETH RIVER RANCH AREA THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO.

restored to its natural shortgrass prairie ecosystem and not currently open to the public. So much off-limits land makes "No Trespassing" signs ubiquitous, leaving outdoors enthusiasts imagining what lies beyond the barbed-wire fences that crisscross the countryside. "A far greater percentage of people in Texas don't have an opportunity to be in a true wilderness

setting like in Western states," says Mark Steinbach, executive director of Texas Land Conservancy, a nonprofit that helps landowners preserve the legacy of their land through conservation easements. "Sure, there's access to city parks and to a lesser degree, the state parks, but those are more manicured."

In a state with so little public space—and



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
THE STRUNKS' DOG BIRDIE
STICKS HER HEAD OUT DURING
A DRIVE AROUND THE RANCH;
AN IRON SIGN WELCOMES
VISITORS; SARAH (LEFT) AND
ABBEY STRUNK HOST GUESTS
AT THEIR HUDSPETH RIVER
RANCH; HAMMOCKS HANG IN
FRONT OF THE GUEST HOUSE.



where parks are particularly in demand during the pandemic—land sharing is a welcome new trend and one conservationists hope will also help preserve the land.

As kids, Sarah and Abbey Strunk sipped the waters that bubbled from the limestone creekbed on their family's Hudspeth River Ranch. They would scoop clear,

clean water into their palms and taste the tang of water lilies and the earthiness of moss. Today, they help run the ranch in West Texas where the waters of the Devils River—arguably the most pristine in Texas—first emerge.

During my overnight at the Hudspeth, I witness how the Strunk sisters have been shaped by their access to the remote land that's been in their family since 1905. They can easily maneuver a Suburban over

hair-raising low-water crossings, shoot an aoudad across a canyon at 300 yards, and catch and clean a 21-inch smallmouth bass. Now in their late 20s, they understand how fortunate they were to roam these 15,000 acres throughout their childhood. And they would like to share it in the most respectful, responsible way.

"I realize that my childhood experience is not the norm," Sarah says. "Unfortunately, such places are disappearing, and in order to preserve these treasures for future generations, we must share them with others. Sharing our place allows people to find a connection with the outdoors and hopefully want to keep them around." The Hudspeth, which can sleep 10 guests,



runs \$650 a night per adult, with kids staying for free.

Landowners have been leasing ranchland to hunters and outdoor sportsmen since the 1950s, and it's become an essential revenue stream. But Explore Ranches' model is different. It proffers a connection between owner and guest, one in which guests experience nature that is normally inaccessible, and owners generate income while educating and motivating others to help keep the land undeveloped.

Kleberg, Explore Ranches' co-owner, has a personal connection to this mission. A member of the King Ranch family, he comes from a long line of conservationists. In 1934, his great-grandfather, U.S. Congressman and rancher Richard Kleberg, authored the Federal Duck Stamp Law, which requires waterfowl hunters to purchase a stamp that now raises millions annually for wetland conservation. Kleberg is a former associate director for the Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation and is currently producing the first Hollywood-quality feature-length documentary about Texas' unique ecosystems called *Deep in the Heart, a Texas Wildlife Story*, due for release in 2022.

Kleberg says private landowners are often the best stewards of their land—if they can afford to keep it. He knows that when landowners are forced to sell, the resulting fragmentation can be

environmentally devastating, particularly for the animals that require undeveloped corridors of land to roam. If you want to protect Texas land, you need to collaborate with landowners.

“Landowners can have the greatest positive impact on the future of our open spaces, water, and wildlife,” Kleberg says. “And if Explore Ranches and other land-sharing platforms can create memorable outdoor moments for people, even if it's just looking at the Milky Way, those moments stay with the guests and multiply.”

I'm having my own memorable outdoor moment, bumping around in the Strunk sisters' scuffed-up ranch Suburban, their two eager border collies, Nellie and Birdie, scrambling from seat to seat. With their father, Billy Bob Strunk, we drive out to see the prehistoric rock art tucked away in the limestone bluffs at a far corner of the property. We also go to Alice's Wonderland, their mother Alice Ball Strunk's favorite swimming hole. Alice, a no-fuss lawyer with a fondness for Birkenstocks, manages the ranch's goat and lamb enterprise, a business she learned from her mother.

But the pièce de résistance of Hudspeth is Pecan Springs, the headwaters of the



AIRSTREAM

X

FROM LEFT: AN
AIRSTREAM CALLED
"MOONBEAM" AND A
VINTAGE "CANNED HAM"
TRAILER ARE LODGING
OPTIONS VIA HIPCAMP
ON ROUND MOUNTAIN
RANCH.

International

Devils River. It is a strangely emotional moment seeing where Texas' wildest river is born. Water gushes up from the dark aquifer below and catches light for the first time, shimmering and clear. About 45 miles from this spot, it will disappear into Amistad Reservoir near Del Rio, where it will meld into the Rio Grande and flow into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Strunk sisters tell me if the aquifer gets depleted, springs such as these could dry up. We talk about their mother, a board member for the Devils River Conservancy. She's currently fighting to keep a Chinese billionaire from installing a mammoth wind farm along the river, which threatens to make the waterway far less pristine.

Explore Ranches' aspiration to win recruits to land conservation has worked on me. I have a connection with this land now and the people who take care of it. Talking with the Strunks underscored the deep responsibility three generations have had for this land, and the dedication required to keep it healthy and wild.

In contrast to the ultra-curated and high-end Explore Ranches experience, Hipcamp is a more rugged and far more budget-friendly land-sharing platform. The online marketplace provides a spectrum of getaways: pitching a tent on a

Dripping Springs farm for \$20 a night or hiding away in a tepee near Granbury for \$48. Initially a website guide for campers, Hipcamp launched its land-sharing platform in 2013. It now offers a diverse menu of natural lodgings—on farms and vineyards, in treehouses and cabins—and in a reasonable price range. The company's key performance indicator is “nights outside;” currently, their users have spent more than 2 million nights under the stars.

Browsing hipcamp.com from my desk in the city is like flipping through a magical camping catalogue. It has so many possibilities that an urbanite's dream of sitting around a campfire or smelling petrichor from a tent after it rains is easily within reach. Alyssa Ravasio, Hipcamp's founder, believes mental health and time in nature go hand in hand.

“Getting outside is more important than ever,” Ravasio explains. “I am a firm believer in biophilia—that getting outside is essential to human health and happiness—and science is really starting to back this up with research. Especially with all the extra pain and stress in the world right now, being outdoors can help people find rest and healing.”

Sometimes an overnight getaway in a 2004 Airstream trailer called “Moonbeam” is all the rest and healing you need. I make a reservation with Michael Larson to stay at Round Mountain Ranch, located by



WHERE TO STAY WITH EXPLORE RANCHES

Visit exploreranches.com for sample itineraries, available activities, and amenities for each property.

Withers Ranch, Kent: A hiker's paradise tucked away in the Davis Mountains, the ranch's 16,000 acres offer some of the most precipitous mountain views in Texas. A “hosted” experience at the two-bedroom home includes a landowner who will guide you and cook for you. \$650 per night, per adult (children under 12 stay for free), sleeps eight

Rocker B Ranch, Graford: With tennis courts, baseball diamonds, skeet shooting, and enough room to accommodate a small army, this ranch is ideal for a big family reunion. Nestled in the wilds of Palo Pinto Canyon, the Rocker B is one of Explore Ranches' “semi-hosted” experiences, which means guests are greeted by a landowner or landowner representative, and catered meals and guided excursions are available upon request. \$5,000 a night, sleeps 60

Llano Spring Ranch, Junction: With 3 miles of the Llano running through it, this ranch offers a river-centric experience that can include kayaking, paddleboarding, and a visit to the nearby Blue Hole. The Llano Springs Ranch is a “semi-hosted” experience. Guests can also learn about the ranch's award-winning efforts in sustainable land-management practices. \$1,200 a night, sleeps eight





WHERE TO STAY WITH HIPCAMP

Visit [hipcamp.com](https://www.hipcamp.com) to see a full range of accommodations, add-ons, and activities.

Boulderdash, Bandera: With a cabin, five RV spots, and three tent sites, this small property on the Medina River offers the most coveted of qualities: river access. Because of its river views, Hipcamp users named Boulderdash RV Site No. 2 “Best Hipcamp Camping Spot in Texas” in 2019.

\$25–\$35 a night for tent sites, maximum of eight people per site; \$50 a night for RV sites, maximum of six people per site; \$165 a night for cabin, sleeps eight

5D Ranch, Navasota: This 400-acre ranch of woodlands and prairies offers 14 miles of trails for hiking, a pond and a lake for fishing, and 18 spacious campsites with fire pits. Turkeys, horses, hogs, miniature ponies, and other animals share the property. \$30 per campsite, maximum of 16 guests per site

JH Ranch, Stephenville: Hang out long enough on the porch of the rustic log cabin perched over a 6-acre lake, and you just might see a beaver. The simple but comfortable cabin, which sleeps five, has a kitchen and air conditioning. A paddleboat and kayaks are available to use for free, and a bass boat for serious lake fishing costs \$50 to rent. \$145 a night, sleeps five

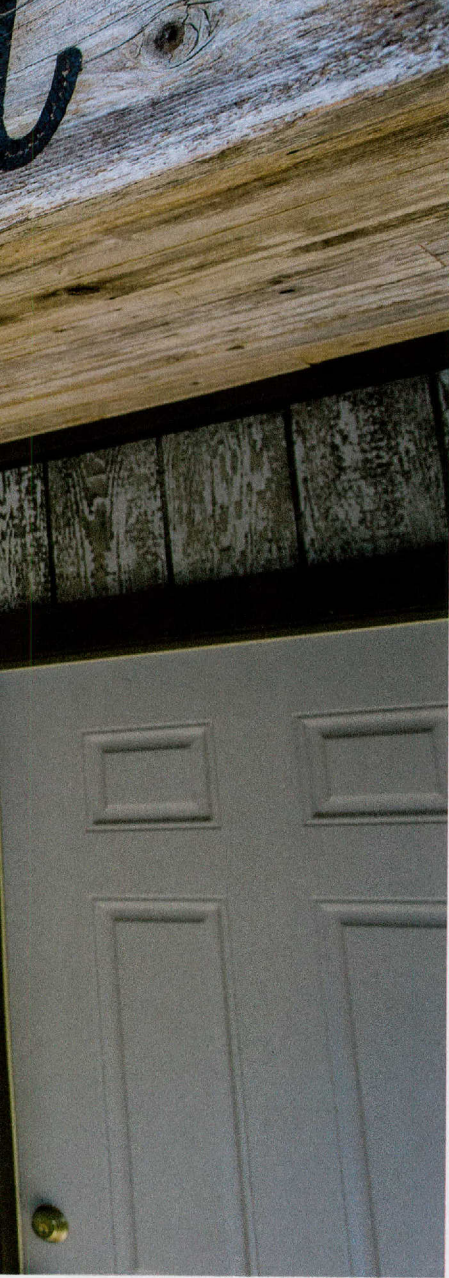


the Balcones Canyonland Preserve near Leander. His 5 tree-covered acres include a tiny “canned ham” trailer, a cabin, several primitive campsites, and Moonbeam, my home for one beautiful night.

Much like the Strunks, Larson is motivated by love of the land. He lives in his own house on the property—although he keeps a low profile and doesn’t intrude on guests—and is a dedicated steward of it. Settling into Moonbeam, I note his care and attention to detail. The interior evokes a 1960s space pod, one that Larson has tricked out with custom *Jetsons*-style shelving, lilac sheets, kilim pillows, and a well-placed book of Leonard Cohen poetry on the writing desk. Everything has

a place, and all the essentials are included. The best part is watching the fireflies and rising moon from the ample outdoor deck.

“I’m only here for a while. This land will continue on,” says Larson, about his cedar- and oak-filled slice of earth where he has carved out hiking trails and a vernal pond. “We think something is ours, but in the big picture it’s not. My goal is just to leave this land better than I found it.” The way Larson talks about it, land sharing really does sound like the type of sharing you learn about in kindergarten. He has something I don’t, and thanks to this new platform, I can affordably enjoy it, too. The money he makes from Hipcamp, he reinvests in his land’s care.



Ravasio says Hipcamp, like Explore Ranches, has seen a surge of users since the onset of COVID-19, which has helped landowners stay economically afloat amid the pandemic's financial challenges. Landowners are making three times more on Hipcamp this year than they did last year, as more people are traveling close to home and seeking vacations with plenty of room to roam crowd-free. According to Ravasio, some of their most successful properties earned as much as \$100,000 in their first few months. Hipcamp recently launched "Extras," an option for guests

to add on experiential offerings like a chef-cooked meal with local ingredients, firewood for the perfect campfire, and even weddings.

Land sharing is a triple win: Guests get to experience previously off-limits wilderness, landowners and workers earn their livelihood from the land, and, if the land remains undeveloped, it's a win for the ecosystem that depends upon it. During a time when so many of our lives are isolated and unmoored, "nights outside" can aid the preservation of our well-being, and—just maybe—our world. 🌲



**MICHAEL LARSON'S
HIPCAMP PROPERTY
NEAR LEANDER OFFERS
SEVERAL TYPES OF
ACCOMMODATIONS,
INCLUDING A CABIN,
CAMPING AREA, AND
AIRSTREAM.**



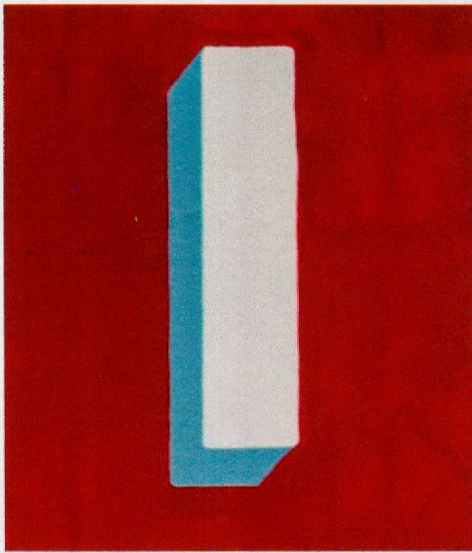
**LIGHTS,
CAMERA,**

**COOR
SIC
ANA**

The small Texas town that defies easy stereotypes
has captured Hollywood's attention

**BY SARAH HEPOLA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN FITZGERALD**





I used to pass small towns and feel sorry for the people who lived in them. What could you do there? Who could you be? Much of modern life was such a race to be exceptional—the biggest house, the most followers—that I felt a hint of sadness staring at those rusty warehouses and abandoned shacks off the highways of rural Texas, a land that time forgot. But something happened as the technology age unfolded, with all its virtual bustle and ambient anxiety—and I became a woman who sniffed around small towns looking for a hit of what they had. A slow-pour pace, a sense of community, something called affordable rent.

That's how I wound up spending time in Corsicana, a town of 25,000 people an hour south of Dallas. The more I wandered its quaint contours, the more I came to feel not sadness for the people who lived there, but envy for their lifestyles. Contrary to my preconceived notions, there was plenty going on: an artist residency, a hit reality show, and a police chief making movies.

"I wrote a Western last week," said Robert Johnson, the first police chief I ever met with his own Internet Movie Database (IMDb) page. Over the past decade, Johnson has acted in more than 30 TV and film productions. More recently he's cracked his knuckles as a producer and screenwriter. When we met, he was eagerly preparing for the filming of his Western, fittingly called *Corsicana*. Johnson's unusual career in law



enforcement and entertainment has helped bring more than a dozen projects to town in the past few years, including a drama called *Warning Shot* with David Spade and a B-movie satire called *American Zombieland*, the climax of which involved locals descending on the historic downtown as mobs of the undead. But Johnson is only one of many people re-imagining what it means to live and thrive in rural Texas, a part of the country that is transforming from a land time forgot into a land of opportunity.

Corsicana's rise in the 21st century is a story of small towns, which are making a comeback as the blinking metropolises grow more clogged, expensive, untenable. You could say the internet started it, unlatching us from any fixed geographic spot. But Chip and Joanna Gaines turned the trend into a revival, building an empire in Waco by showing folks how to transform those abandoned shacks into neo-rustic dream homes. A new generation was rediscovering towns like Lockhart, Brenham, and Marble Falls long before the pandemic and the rise of Zoom made their own compelling arguments against urban density. As I wandered the wide





OPENING SPREAD:

The sights and smells of Corsicana.

CLOCKWISE FROM

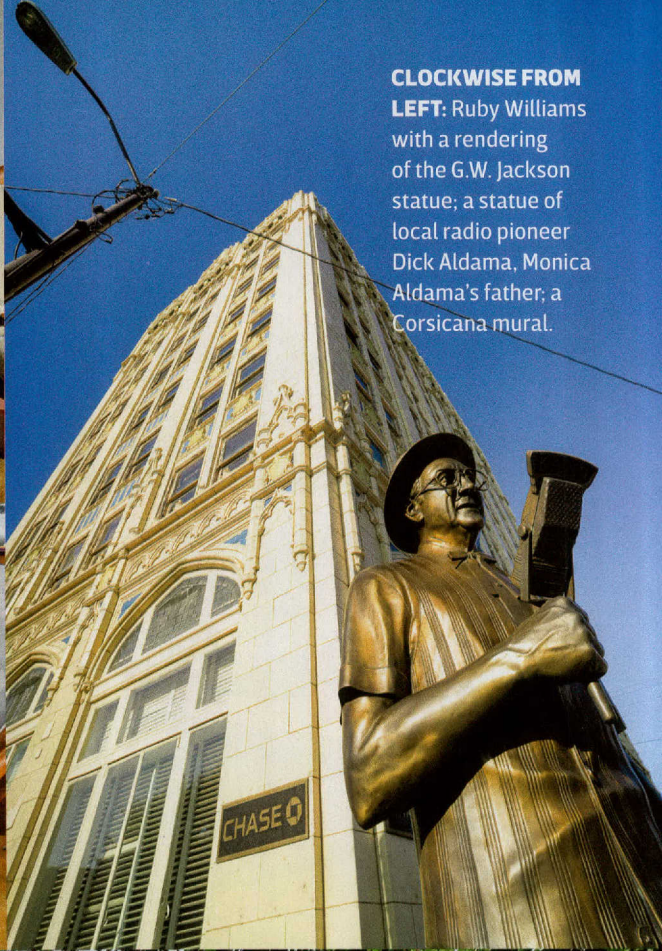
LEFT: A museum honoring the local honky-tonker; Chief of Police Robert Johnson moonlights as a filmmaker; Carolyn McCombs renovated the Corsicana Opry.



avenues of Corsicana, I noticed how easy it was to socially distance, as though staying 6 feet apart was not a public health measure but a way of being.

Until recently, Corsicana had been known for one thing: fruitcake. Collin Street Bakery is home to the indomitable dessert and, improbably, the setting of a made-in-Hollywood baked good scandal featuring an unassuming accountant who embezzled millions. A movie about the crime, starring Will Ferrell, was in development, although its current status is unknown. The city's reputation leveled up in early 2020, when a Netflix reality series called *Cheer* tumbled into the zeitgeist. The compulsively watchable six-episode show—it came to town independently of Johnson's efforts—took viewers through a nail-biting season with the top-ranked Navarro College cheerleaders, whose injuries and feats of daring show how cheerleading has evolved from sideline spectacle to rigorous competition. With its gravity-defying basket tosses and hard-luck tales of kids vying for greatness, *Cheer* was like Cirque du Soleil meets *Our Town*. The show was a surprise hit, garnering three Emmy wins and turning its hard-driving but maternal head coach, beloved Corsicanian Monica Aldama, into an overnight sensation who waltzed her way to 10th place on *Dancing with the Stars* while continuing to coach her famous squad.

Surprises have long been part of Corsicana's history. A man drilling for water struck oil in 1894, turning a land of cotton fields into the first oil boomtown west of the Mississippi. The railroads had arrived in 1871, making for a bustling turn-of-the-century marketplace where enterprise and characters collided. A boy named Lyman T. Davis dragged his wagon past the saloons to sell bowls of chili for 5 cents, a business that became Wolf Brand Chili. An oil field worker fathered



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Ruby Williams with a rendering of the G.W. Jackson statue; a statue of local radio pioneer Dick Aldama, Monica Aldama's father; a Corsicana mural.

a singing cowboy named Lefty Frizzell, whose honky-tonk yodel influenced generations of country performers including Willie Nelson, who recorded an album of cover songs. (The Lefty Frizzell Museum at Pioneer Village is one of the city's hidden gems.) In 1884, a one-legged tightrope walker strung a high wire across the main street only to tumble to his death and into Texas lore. The unidentified man is buried in a grave under the name "Rope Walker," though a recent book claims his name is Joseph Berg. When I expressed confusion about this story to a local—why was a one-legged man walking on a high wire across downtown again?—he answered in a soft twang with a wave of his hand. "Well, he had to sell his potbelly stove."

The sliding-door moment for Corsicana came in 1919, when city leaders, hoping to retain the town's cozy charm, declined to let Magnolia Petroleum Co. build two 29-story skyscrapers in downtown. The company, which became Mobil Oil, moved to Dallas, along with much of progress. Corsicana still had wealthy oil families whose patronage shaped the town, but the urban boom that transformed Texas in the latter half of the 20th century left Corsicana largely untouched. The rare success story was Collin Street Bakery, whose pecan-rich DeLuxe Fruitcakes were a mail-order sensation, becoming both late-night punchline and holiday staple. But the downtown area fell into disrepair, a slump that spread through much of rural America. It took decades to revitalize the downtown into a place where out-of-towners might like to venture.



DOWNTOWN CORSICANA called to me when I pulled off a drab stretch of Interstate 45 one Sunday on my way back home to Dallas from a friend's ranch in nearby Streetman. I sauntered along the red-brick storefronts that reminded me of 20th-century Americana, with new and old murals seemingly made for the Instagram age. The main stretch of Beaton Street was spookily quiet, the only noise the lonely blare of a train passing through. I could have been the only one there, although in fact I was learning a valuable lesson about small Texas towns: never visit on Sunday. Everything's closed.

That sense of having stumbled onto something unique is a common experience here. "It felt like limitless potential to build a world," said Kyle Hobratschk, a young artist who struggled to find an affordable wood shop for making furniture while living in Dallas about nine years ago. He heard about a space in downtown Corsicana, a leaky, three-story, 19th-century former Odd Fellows lodge that was equal parts decrepit and magical. He bought it.

He called the place 100W—after the address (100 W. 3rd Ave.) and because he liked the notion of "going west" to build—and spent years restoring it to a dreamy marvel of natural light with huge lofts. He didn't need 11,000 square feet of space, so along with a few other local artists, he hatched a plan to build a residency that has now hosted a hundred visiting artists and writers from places like Iceland, Scotland, South Korea, Argentina, Germany, and New York. Residents get to experience a part of the state that might not be

as familiar to tourists as Marfa and Austin but still matches the Texas of the imagination. Cattle ranches, empty mills, rolling prairies. "The art world can be snobby and insular," Hobratschk said. "We can introduce our Parisian resident to an 80-year-old cowboy."

The residency's location in a mostly conservative town offers a bridge into another America for the characteristically liberal-minded, a connection that has been hard to make in a time marked by echo chambers on both sides and the impulse to block-delete anyone who disagrees. Small towns have not always been celebrated for their accepting natures, but what I heard from locals on subjects like politics, sexual orientation, or religion was that it's hard to hate someone you see at the grocery store or chat with on the street. The old complaint about small towns was: Everyone knows you! Now, in the vast anonymous internet age, when social media has turned into a battleground and flattened so much of human complication, the words sounded soothing to me—a promise that your soul could not be swept aside. *Everyone knows you.*

The history of Corsicana is not without complication. Councilwoman Ruby Williams remembers going to school before integration, which came to Corsicana in 1970. "I had to walk to school 30 minutes every day, whereas my white counterparts rode the bus and said derogatory remarks as they passed," she told me in a smooth contralto, as we sat in the Martin Luther King Jr. Center on the east side of town. Williams has represented the mostly Black and Hispanic neighborhood for 16 years. Corsicana is fairly diverse. White residents make up 40%; Hispanic, 35%; and Black, 19%. But like so many other cities, the town has suffered a painful racial divide. "Things are better now," Williams said, "but they're not where they ought to be."

Williams' father was a minister and sharecropper, and she remembers picking cotton when she was 4 and weighing the bag on her daddy's scale—two bucks a bag. "I thought I was going to move away," she said, and sighed. But life happened. She got married, had a family. Like many people I spoke with, she had a sense she might be useful in her hometown. She showed up for our interview straight from church, wearing a sharp white suit and dangly beaded earrings that shimmied when she moved her head. "How old do you think I am?" she asked at one point, with the confidence of a woman who is going to win this game. I guessed she was in her 50s. "Seventy-six," she told me, and I whistled.

Over those decades, Williams has seen progress, albeit slow. Lately, one of the projects she's helped oversee is the creation of a bronze sculpture of G.W. Jackson, a Black principal whose school was so excellent in the early 1900s that, as the story goes, kids rode from Dallas to attend. Bronze statues around town are a Corsicana trademark, one of the ways the town tells the story of itself, but until now there has not been a statue of an African American. The G.W. Jackson Multicultural Society commissioned one, tapping artist



Spencer Evans, a Houston native, to create the sculpture. It captures Jackson in a powerful posture, hand reaching out. A video of the sculpture in progress, shared on the *Corsicana Daily Sun's* Facebook page, got thousands of views.

"He wanted our children to tap into a better life," Williams said. "Back then, our children could only work in the cotton field or Oil City Iron Works. There wasn't even fast food." But Jackson believed in education, and so does Williams. "We need to know where we came from, to know where we're going."

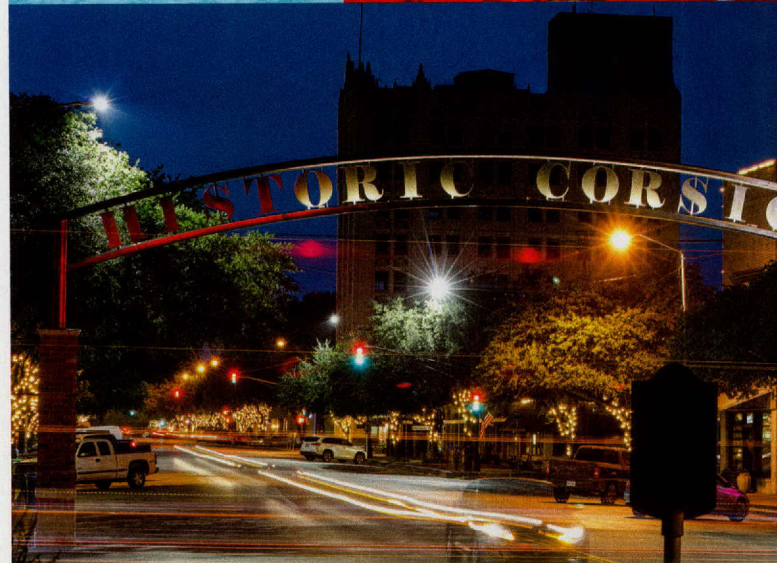
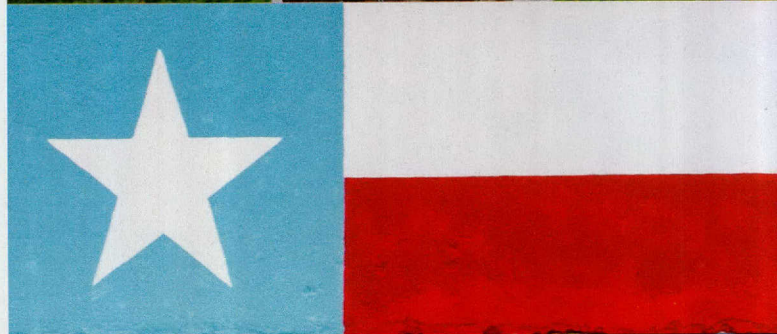
ON AN UNUSUALLY CHILLY day in September, I drove along a winding farm road to an old white church and a cemetery where Johnson was filming his Western. I never could get my head around a police chief making movies. When I asked him what folks in the department thought about it, he said, "I don't hunt, I don't fish, I haven't watched TV in seven years. So, what other people think of what I do on my time off? Well."

At a moment when trust and communication between police and ordinary citizens have been strained, Johnson told me his side hustle was a bonus, not a detraction. "You have no clue how many young people will not talk to Robert Johnson the police chief," he said, "but will run across the parking lot, call, or drop by to speak to Robert Johnson the actor, writer, producer."

Johnson's law-enforcement career began in Corsicana in the late '80s, but by the '90s he was working in Dallas, where he became police chief of Methodist Hospital. A friend kept nudging him to try acting. He has one of those faces. Strong, weather-beaten. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger crossed with Jon Voight. But he also has one of those back-clapping Southern personalities that could work as a sheriff, a salesman, and a lawyer, all of which he's played. Ten years ago, he landed a cameo on the short-lived Fox TV show *Lone Star*. The bug bit. He retired from Methodist Hospital in 2016 and planned to act full-time, when the Corsicana chief of police job came up and he spotted an opportunity. "I thought: Why not? I'll end my career where it started."

In 2016, Johnson spent weekends in Bakersfield, California, working on the movie *Trafficked*, a thriller starring Ashley Judd. The varied topography there makes it a popular filming location, and it struck him Corsicana could provide something similar: lakes, cattle ranches, a historic downtown that could look like an old mining town or Anyplace, USA. He partnered with local business leaders, including Jimmy Hale, who owns the Across the Street Diner, and Amber McNutt, part of the McNutt family that owns Collin Street Bakery. About a dozen projects have come to town from as far away as India and Russia. A Bollywood production was set to film during the summer, but COVID-19 temporarily shut that down.

Corsicana, however, is continuing apace. Johnson's new film project tells the story of Bass Reeves, the first Black





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A statue celebrating Collin Street Bakery's fruitcake; Kyle Hobratschk inside 100W, downtown Corsicana.

lawman of the West. Reeves' life was riveting. Born in 1838, he escaped slavery and lived among the Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles. Later, he was recruited to work for the police in Arkansas and Oklahoma, logging 3,000 arrests and becoming the first Black U.S. deputy marshal.

"This guy is the Black Panther of law enforcement," said TV and film actor Isaiah Washington, who is starring as Reeves and more recently took over as director of the movie. Washington wears a navy Union Army jacket, and his gray-dappled beard has enormous fluffy mutton chops.

If you think filming a movie during a pandemic might be complicated, you would be correct. "This is my sixth test," said producer Ryan DeLaney, as he coughed into his elbow, per instructions, before getting his mouth swabbed. Some cast and crew members had to be replaced when they didn't want to fly, and the Screen Actors Guild has strict limitations on food, sanitizing, masking, and social distancing. Johnson said the filming costs about 35% more during COVID-19. "I have to be cognizant of writing in a way where we have the fewest actors or crew members in the area," he told me.

There are also strict rules for on-set visitors, which is how I wound up observing across the dirt road, near barbed wire in a spot called Zone B, which might as well have been called "you can go home now."

I headed back to Dallas on I-45, but as I passed signs for

downtown Corsicana, I pulled off to make one last stop. Despite my many visits, there was one view I hadn't gotten, and I texted Hobratschk to see if he could help. "What time might be ideal?" he replied, ever the gentleman. Neighborly visits, another small-town bonus.

Ten minutes later, Hobratschk walked me up a narrow, winding, handmade staircase and lifted a latch that opens onto the broad rooftop of 100W, a view he had told me about. Both of us stepped to the perimeter to take in the full panorama: a sweeping view of a small Texas town. The buildings looked like pieces of a puzzle slotting together: the renovated Palace Theatre, the railroad, and Grace Community Church. I have stood on many tall rooftops marveling at epic views, but this was the opposite. How human-scale, how easy to wrap the mind around.

Hobratschk told me he writes checks and walks them over to the water company, one of those rural inconveniences he's come to enjoy. It sounds nearly Paleolithic in a day of Venmo, but he likes writing the numbers in the box and walking the money to its next location, earning each step of the transaction.

"The more I'm here, the more I think this is how people should be living," he remarked.

I wanted to stay for the sunset, but you know, modern life. I needed to beat the traffic. 🚗





FOR LOVE OF THE OUTDOORS

A SELF-CARE TRIP THROUGH
THE PARKS OF TEXAS

BY ASHER ELBEIN

I was not alone in my urge to escape. According to a survey conducted in June by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of adults reporting mental health conditions like depression and anxiety had risen to 41%—double the pre-pandemic rate. The nation continues to face a crushing amount of stress. “A disaster like a hurricane comes and goes, and people know that it’s over now,” said Lokesh Shahani, a psychiatrist at McGovern Medical School, part of the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. “Our first case of COVID was somewhere back in April, and we’re still dealing with it.”

Many people have coped with it by going outside. While there is no precise study of how many Americans have



The pale light of a summer morning

crept in between canopies of sweetgum and water oak, casting dappled shadows over the paths of Big Thicket National Preserve. Beyond a shuttered visitor center, the Kirby Nature Trail wound through bay-gall thickets and flooded cypress sloughs, through explosions of ferns and piles of decaying logs. The air pressed in like wet velvet, heavy with pollen and leaf mold.

I’d come to the Big Thicket because, on this August day, American civil society felt like it was splitting at the seams. A viral pandemic had killed 100,000 people; a month later, the number would double. Swaths of the population had spent months cooped up at home, juggling parenting with their jobs, or venturing to workplaces fraught with new dangers. The economy had taken its worst hit since the Great Depression, and the nation’s political discourse was in tatters.

I’d been feeling a restless desire to escape the world—and a contradictory yearning to immerse myself in it. I was also curious about how Texas’ public lands were faring in an unprecedented time of quarantine shutdowns and surging interest in outdoor recreation. So, I decided to hit the road, plotting a route from the timber forests of East Texas, to the coastal plains of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, to the Panhandle canyons where the bison roam. The wilderness called to me, offering isolation and meditation. But what would I find?

OPENING SPREAD: Emma Scott, a forest therapy guide, in Sam Houston National Forest. **THIS SPREAD:** Scenes from Big Thicket National Preserve.





Panhandle Canyons



*East Texas
Timber Forests*

*★
Austin*



Lower Rio Grande Valley

visited parks since March, my casual poll of friends and acquaintances found a sharp uptick. One friend, Eva Sadler, of Austin, went to just three parks in Texas in 2019. But since quarantine started, she and her husband have visited 10 parks and camped at four, venturing to places both near—Enchanted Rock State Natural Area—and far off—Monahans Sandhills State Park, 370 miles from Austin. State parks in Texas closed briefly in the early days of the pandemic, but they have since reopened at 75% capacity with safety measures in place. Online reservations are encouraged; many ranger-led programs are on hold; and some visitor centers are closed. Texas State Parks Director Rodney Franklin said the system's total visitation numbers are down due to the visitor caps, but generally parks have seen a sort of perpetual spring break, with numbers holding steady during the week as well as the weekend.

Anecdotal evidence shows quite a few of these visitors are new. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's customer service center has fielded an increase in calls from people who've never been to a state park and are curious about where they should visit, Franklin said. "This pandemic has been rough on everybody," he said. "But it has given folks an opportunity to find a new way to enjoy time outside. Folks who've never been to a state park will potentially see how cool they are, and see how they're great places to visit. And maybe when this is all behind us, they'll continue to be visitors and supporters of state parks moving forward."

The Sadlers have tried to make the most of the situation.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: Yucca at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge; a sabal palm in the Rio Grande Valley; birding at Laguna Atascosa.



Though they've visited state parks before, the anxieties of quarantine motivated them to get outside more. "There's a complete and total difference between sitting in your home, quarantined, and then going out to Enchanted Rock and being able to see the Milky Way and shooting stars," Eva said. "It reorganizes my body and my brain in a way."

Shahani said there's ample evidence that exposure to wilderness can be soothing to body and soul: Research has shown that going out into green spaces is linked to better stress regulation, decreased cortisol levels, and increased mental health.

Society's newfound interest in parks is more than our simple desire for a break, however. This spring, as the pandemic struck, a rash of feel-good stories spread on social media—wishful accounts of wilderness creeping back into quiet cities, of animals reclaiming abandoned streets and thriving in empty parks. Such stories were overblown, according to park officials I spoke with. But the rumors showed a hunger for an often undervalued human need: to be still and watch the rhythms of the world around us. Because of the pandemic, many of us have been forced—by circumstance and stir-craziness—to pay attention to nature.

Simply being outside in greenery provides relief, but I wanted to take a more mindful approach. Before getting on the road, I called Emma Scott, a resident of Conroe who serves as a "forest bathing" guide. She leads nature outings that draw on a Japanese therapy practice of experiencing nature through the senses. Scott walked me through



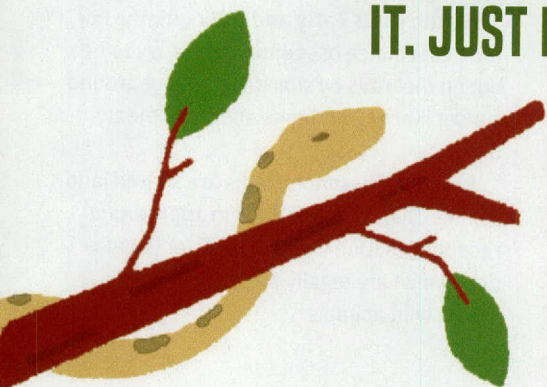
the fundamentals: Move slowly, pay close attention to your senses, and keep yourself open to the world around you. "You don't want to force it," Scott said. "Just be in the space."

Armed with Scott's advice, I drove out to the Big Thicket in East Texas. The preserve sprawls in a series of discrete units around the town of Kountze, with multiple trailheads, day-use areas, and access points scattered throughout the region.

"We are very biologically diverse," Big Thicket park ranger Megan Urban told me.



**MOVE SLOWLY, PAY CLOSE
ATTENTION TO YOUR SENSES,
AND KEEP YOURSELF OPEN
TO THE WORLD AROUND YOU.
“YOU DON’T WANT TO FORCE
IT. JUST BE IN THE SPACE.”**



“You can visit us in one of our units and see a roadrunner and prickly pear, and on the same day, visit another unit and see an alligator. It’s the easternmost part of some western plant and animal communities, and the westernmost range of species from the east. The biodiversity is phenomenal.”

Big Thicket has remained open throughout the pandemic, though its visitor center and bathrooms closed temporarily. Ranger-led programs have been canceled since March. None of this has significantly dissuaded visitors. The preserve reported a slight decrease in visitors during May (20,000), but visitation jumped to around 28,000 in June before settling into normal numbers of about 22,500 visitors per month for July and August.

I spent two days hiking in the Big Thicket, setting out in the early morning. On each jaunt, I focused for a time on a single sense; the slight rustles and chirps of the birds, the scent of mud and vegetation, the light shimmering on spiderwebs stretched taut across the trails. I saw a rat snake peering out of a leaning snag and an otter chasing trapped fish around the roots of a cypress in a drying pool. It would have been easy to miss all of this. I’m a fast walker, and sometimes I fall into autopilot. Forest bathing demands the opposite: to slow down, breathe through each step, and let the woods show you their secrets.

From the Big Thicket, I traveled south, through the rich pasturelands of the Texas Gulf Coast, to the 110,000-acre Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge near Brownsville. I had hopes of glimpsing an ocelot, one of the elusive spotted cats that inhabit the park. Though I had the trails to myself, the refuge wasn’t empty. I saw cyclists on the roads and cars in the parking lots. According to ranger Chris Quezada, the refuge’s attendance dropped in the spring but had been steady during the summer with around 30 visitors on weekdays and up to 200 on weekends.

I spent two afternoons wandering the refuge, keeping a running count of road-runners and rabbits that scampered out of my way. The breeze was heavy with salt from Bahia Grande, and butterflies floated

like scraps of colorful paper over the tall grass. I spent one magical morning sitting in a bird blind near the visitor center, watching chachalaca birds, orioles, and green jays scold an immense indigo snake drinking from their birdbath. The ocelots, true to their reputation, kept hidden.

I left Laguna Atascosa and headed north to the final stop on my road trip, Caprock Canyons State Park. The drive took me across the Hill Country, where the limestone hills fell away and the sky grew until I sped through rolling open plains dotted with weathered towns. Located near the bottom of the Panhandle, where the plains meet the Caprock escarpment, Caprock Canyons State Park harbors a spiderweb of ravines and bottomlands covered in juniper and scrub oak.

The cap on state park visitors has helped prevent the park from getting overwhelmed, but it has been busy nevertheless.

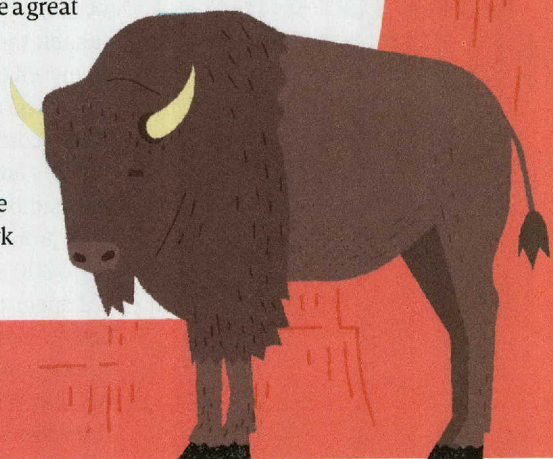


THE BISON NEVER BROKE STRIDE, CONTINUING ON PAST ME, SHAGGY AND COMPACT WITH MUSCLE, ITS EYES STEADY AND SOULFUL.

“We usually have a slow July and August, and it has not slowed down,” Park Superintendent Donald Beard said. The park has also seen slightly higher numbers of vandalism incidents and reports of heat exhaustion. Such complications are to be expected, Beard said; it comes with having new visitors.

“A lot of people who are coming are not our regular users, and a lot of them are new to state parks in general,” he said. “They’re just looking for a place to get out and get away, and state parks are a great opportunity for that.”

Caprock Canyons’ campsites were indeed full of tents and RVs during my visit. But when I started out on the South Prong Trail one morning before sunrise, it felt as if I had the park



HOW TO VISIT PARKS SAFELY

Make reservations online: Almost all state parks are open with limited capacity. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department recommends making advance reservations on its website, tpwd.texas.gov. Walk-up entry is allowed, but with the attendance restrictions, many parks may be booked up. National parks, preserves, and wildlife refuges are also open, at least in limited capacity. Most don’t require advance reservations.

Plan for shared spaces: Most park restrooms are open, but it’s a good idea to bring along your own soap and hand sanitizer. If you’re going to be making use of picnic tables, consider bringing a table cover. And remember to always wear a mask and maintain a safe distance from other visitors, especially indoors.

Hit the trails early and walk quietly: For the best chance of seeing wildlife, try to be out on the trails by sunrise, or go out around sunset. Know your limits and carry plenty of water.

Respect the space: Parks are shared landscapes. Dispose of all trash in appropriate receptacles. Don’t collect rocks or vegetation, which are legally protected, and don’t hassle wild animals.



Home to the Texas State Bison Herd, Caprock Canyons State Park offers hiking trails through remote canyons.



to myself. There was no sound but the sighing of wind and the insistent buzz of horseflies. As the trail zigzagged sharply up a cliffside, I crawled on all fours, bands of sandstone smooth beneath my fingers. Then the trail dropped back down into the canyons by narrow turns, trees shrinking and growing sparse, until I walked out on broken red hills beneath the sun.

It was here that I met the bison. The Texas State Bison Herd—the only remaining herd of Southern Plains bison living wild on public land—is Caprock Canyons' claim to fame. This one was wandering alone when I rounded the corner to see it walking toward me. Multiple signs posted around the park remind visitors that bison are wild, territorial, and not prone to forgiveness. I backed up as slowly and deferentially as I could, retreating into the vegetation off the trail. The bison never broke stride, continuing on past me, shaggy and compact with muscle, its eyes steady and soulful in its curly-haired face. I watched the ripples of its skin under dancing flies, heard the crunch of hooves on sand. Then it was gone.

This was the experience I'd been hungering for during the months of quarantining in my house. More than exercise, more than a desire for wide-open spaces, I wanted to encounter creatures living a life far removed from my own.

While some parks have shortened their hours and others have limited their services, the natural relief we all crave still awaits our discovery. In comforting contrast to the transient troubles of our society, these wilderness refuges and parks steadily hum their own ancient rhythms. 🐾

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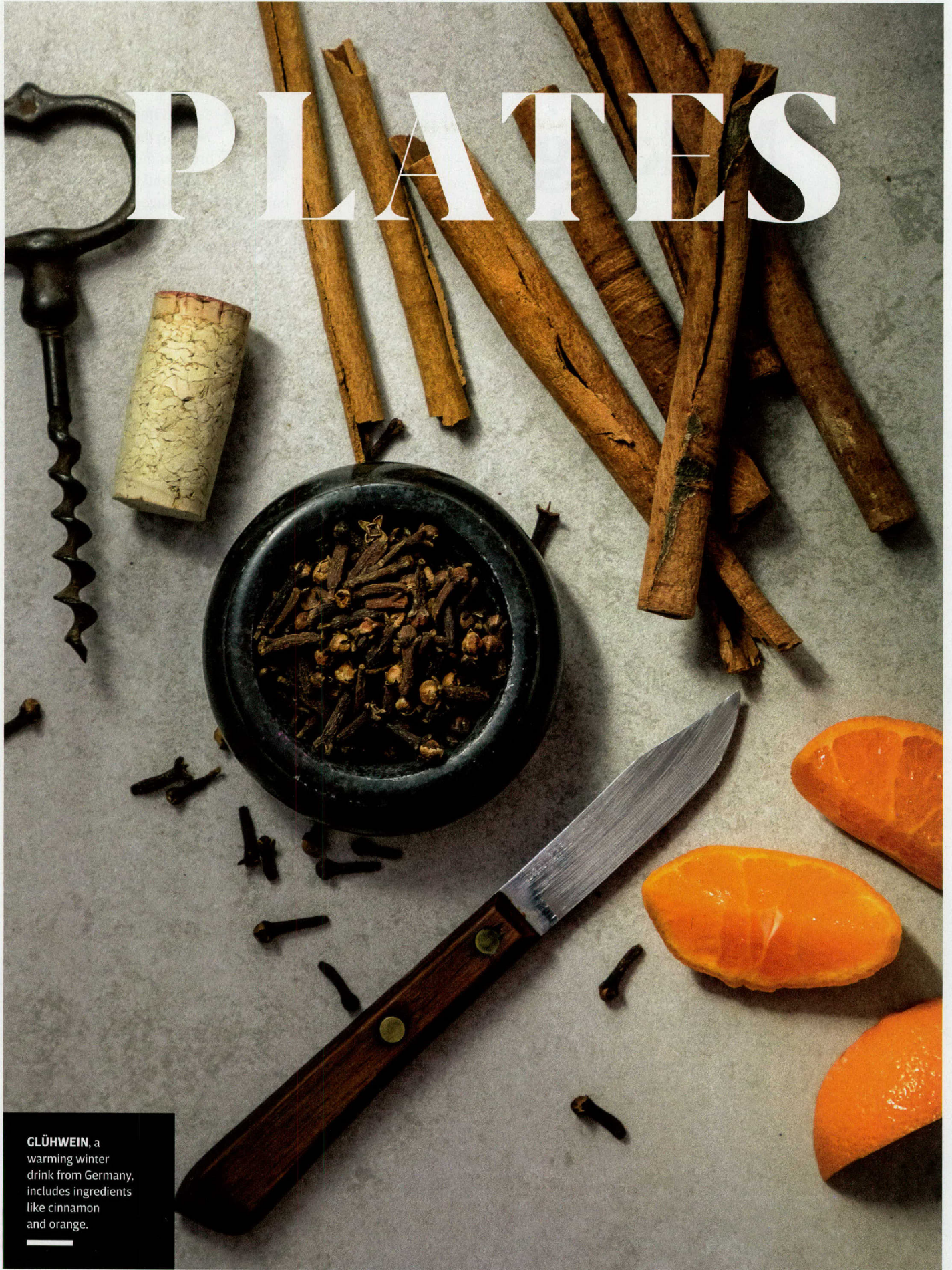
WHEN IT COMES TO DEVELOPING HANDCRAFTED LEATHER GOODS, the designers behind Bear Creek Leather draw inspiration from family members. “Most of our products have been created with a family member in mind to suit their needs, and we will often name our patterns after them. From the first concept to design and actual production, the whole family is involved.” Doug Childers got his start as a one-man shop making holsters, then expanded into totes, leather jewelry, and other products. Along the way, his wife, Betsy, and son and daughter-in-law, William and Angela, joined the business. “We love seeing what our customers come up with to make it personal,” Doug says. Based near New Braunfels, this family business feels at home in the Hill Country. “We love the small towns and all the sights,” he says. “You can catch us enjoying a schnitzel or a pork chop on a stick every year at Wurstfest.”



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PLATES



GLÜHWEIN, a warming winter drink from Germany, includes ingredients like cinnamon and orange.

Making Spirits Bright

A beverage brought over by German immigrants during the 19th century remains a holiday favorite

By Amanda Ogle

WHILE MANY wineries and winter events offer glühwein for sale, it's easy to make at home.

Germans immigrating to Texas in the mid-1800s brought much from their homeland that we still enjoy today—sausage, beer, sauerkraut, polka, and Oktoberfest. During the Christmas season, German heritage is often celebrated with *glühwein*, a warm beverage featuring red wine heated with sugar, citrus, and spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.

While *glühwein* translates to “glow wine,” accounts vary on its etymology. Some say the term “glow wine” comes from the red-hot irons used to heat the wine hundreds of years ago, while others believe it is derived from the glowing feeling brought on by a glass of the hot, spiced beverage.

Glühwein's origin dates to the ancient Egyptians. Around 300 B.C. they made warm, spiced wine and called it “the elixir of the afterlife.” Greek philosopher Hippocrates prescribed spiced wine as a medicinal tonic, as did Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder. Romans were known to heat wine to ward off sickness during cold winters, and they brought mulled wine along with them as they conquered much of Europe in the second century. During the Middle Ages, Europeans called mulled wine “Hippocras,” in honor of Hippocrates, and mixed the hot drink with bay leaves, cardamom, saffron, and long pepper. The oldest known *glühwein* tankard dates to 1420 and belonged to a German nobleman. Around the late 1800s, *glühwein* became associated with Christmas due to the drink's popularity at German Christmas markets known as *Christ-kindlmarkts*. As Germans came to Texas during the 1800s and early 1900s, they brought the *glühwein* tradition with them.

“Every Christmas market in Germany has its own collectible *glühwein* cup that you can keep, a tradition also found at some Texas Christmas markets,” says Christopher Markley, executive director of the German-Texan Heritage Society. Markley also



notes that Julius Schütze, a German immigrant and the first teacher at the German Free School in Austin, referenced drinking hot, spiced wine during the Christmas holidays in his diaries from the late 1880s.

Due to the pandemic, many holiday events that serve glühwein have been canceled this year. But you can still purchase the drink—or similar varieties—from wineries across the state. Pedernales Cellars sells *glögg* (a Swedish-style mulled wine with brandy) in its tasting room in Stonewall and online, as a nod to the owners' Swedish ancestry. The

winery plans to produce 1,500 bottles this year, starting in late October. "It's like the pumpkin spice latte of wine," co-owner Julie Kuhlken says.

Messina Hof sells mulling spices on-site and online, and mulled wine in its tasting rooms in Bryan and Fredericksburg. In Ennis, Sugar Ridge Winery has white and red glühweins available; and Fairhaven Vineyards in Hawkins sells glühwein as well. "Glühwein tends to bring people together," Markley says. "You have a nice, warm drink, and before you know it you're glowing from the inside out and having a good time." 🍷

RECIPE

Glühwein

This recipe comes from German-Texan Heritage Society member Petra Mueller. Her family recipe is served at the organization's annual German Christmas Market.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 bottle of red wine
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 1 orange cut into slices
- 10 whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons of brown sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Put all of the ingredients in one pot. Heat to medium-high, but don't let it boil or the alcohol will dissipate. Let the flavors soak into the wine for at least 30 minutes. Strain into a cup and enjoy warm on a cold winter night.

**"It's like the pumpkin spice latte of wines,"
Pedernales Cellars co-owner Julie Kuhlken says.**



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All Reyna Royo could think about was the taste of Panamanian corn tortillas. After hearing about the only traditional Panamanian restaurant in Texas from a friend on Facebook, she traveled an hour from her home in Austin to quell her craving at Rincón de Panamá.

Her twin brother, Reynaldo Royo, joined her on her sojourn to the hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Killeen. While the state bursts at the seams with taco joints and Tex-Mex restaurants, Royo says Mexican tortillas do not resemble the golden fried corn cakes she grew up eating in Panama.

"It's like a little piece of Panama in Killeen," owner Isabel Muñoz says. "I try to make everything related to the culture. I want everything to be like in Panama."

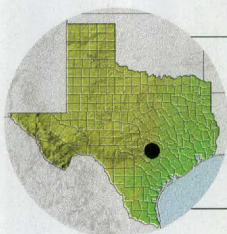
While the restaurant is particularly loved by Panamanians, those unfamiliar with the cuisine often wander in to try the tortillas and other popular dishes like *carne frita* (fried steak) and *patacones* (sliced and fried unripe plantains).

"The Panamanian customer knows the cuisine, but our idea was to bring the culture to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans,

Panama on a Plate

Restaurant owner Isabel Muñoz brings her native cuisine to Killeen

By Sabrina LeBoeuf



RINCÓN DE PANAMÁ
205A N. Gray St.,
Killeen.
254-466-0914

FROM TOP: Owner and chef Isabel Muñoz; potato salad, *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken), *platanos maduros* (plantains), and *bistec picado* (peppered steak).



Americans, and Salvadorians who also live in the United States and like to try different things,” says Sisis Aguilar, who runs the front of the restaurant while her aunt, Muñoz, cooks.

Killeen borders Fort Hood military base, and Muñoz says they commonly welcome veterans who have been stationed in Panama.

“They come because they feel proud that they have been there, that they also worked in Panama,” Muñoz says. “*Como se encuentran con su pasado.*” (It’s like they find themselves with their past.)

Growing up in Panama, Muñoz learned to cook as a way of evading her chores. If it was her turn to clean, she would swap with whichever sibling had kitchen duty. She eventually went to school at the Instituto Nacional de Cultura in Panama City to study theater with a special focus on makeup. She married a U.S. military officer and moved with him to the United States, eventually landing in Hawaii in 2001.

After getting divorced four years later, Muñoz was in search of a fresh start for her and her three young daughters. A military family she met in church encouraged Muñoz to follow them to Fort Hood, so in 2005, Muñoz and her daughters left for Texas.

She worked three jobs to make ends meet as a single mother but came to a crossroads in 2012 after injuring her back on the job.

In 2015, after enduring years of back pain, Muñoz decided to take control of her fate and open her own restaurant. “I’m here in my space,” Muñoz says. “Here, no one tells me, ‘Don’t sit. Don’t stand.’”

Aguilar moved from Panama to help her aunt open the restaurant. On Sundays, they shop together for necessary ingredients for *hojaldras* (fried dough) and *carimañolas* (fried cassava stuffed with beef). Every two days, Muñoz grinds whole corn to make dough for empanadas and corn tortillas.

Since opening her restaurant, Muñoz has honed her cooking skills and acquired more recipes from her travels and research. When she makes her

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**“She always
wants to bring
that positive energy
from her culture.”**

annual visits to Panama, she goes to different provinces to see what traditional dishes are made there. She offers her labor for free to restaurants, just as long as they teach her something new.

When Muñoz isn't cooking at her restaurant, she finds time to share her culture in other ways. For the annual Killeen Christmas Parade, she decorates a float with a Panamanian theme. One year, she adorned her float with saplings; a red, white, and blue skirt; and members of the local Panamanian community dressed in traditional outfits. She also offers classes on Panamanian folklórico dance.

During the pandemic, Muñoz has spent time fundraising to help the poor in Panama. She sends the money to Aguilar, who's currently stuck in Panama due to the airport's closure, to buy packaged foods for families in need. So far, they've fed 100 families.

When the airport opens again, Aguilar plans to return to Killeen to continue helping at the restaurant and learning the recipes. Muñoz is apprenticing her niece in preparation for when she can no longer handle the rigors of restaurant life. “I feel proud because I know she is going to take care of the restaurant,” Muñoz says. “She's been with me from the beginning. She has learned so much.”

For now, Muñoz is enjoying serving fresh corn tortillas and traditional Panamanian favorites to her loyal customer base. Maj. Hector Cantillo usually stops by on a weekly basis. When he asks Muñoz to cook something off the menu, she obliges. Cantillo says it feels like having a tía in Killeen.

“She always wants to bring that positive energy from her culture, like, Hey, we are friendly,” Cantillo says. “We have flavor.”

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NEKA WRIGHT
in her garden
plot at Bonton
Farms in Dallas.

Room to Grow

An urban garden, market, and café in South Dallas provides job opportunities and fresh food for locals

By John Lumpkin

Lanekka Wright remembers the first beet she fell in love with: a mellow golden variety called “badger flame.” It’s one of the veggies she discovered while working at Bonton Farms in South Dallas. “Neka,” as she’s known by her colleagues, became a certified Master Gardener earlier this year.

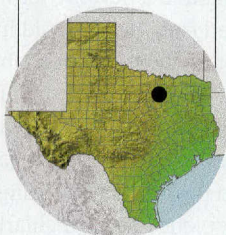
Three years ago, Neka felt “mentally, emotionally, and physically drained,” she says. Her eldest son was in prison, and her grandchild had narrowly escaped a bullet during a shooting. She had also endured a car wreck that killed two friends. An acquaintance who worked at Bonton Farms part time brought her there. Even on her first visit to the farm she recalls feeling “the dark shadows riding my back were moving behind and away from me.”

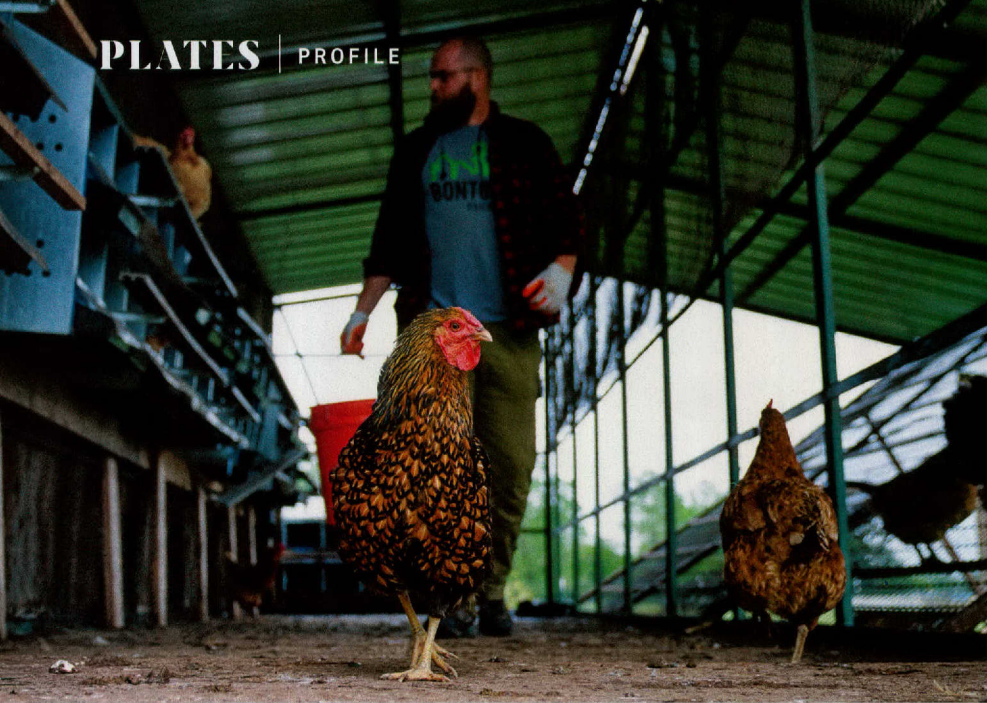
Peace and comfort are fringe benefits of being at the farm, whose main goal is to provide fresh, healthful food and job opportunities to the residents of the Bonton neighborhood. Neka applied to

be a volunteer intern at the farm. She worked her way up to becoming a paid employee, feeding the animals and prepping eggs laid by the chickens. Now, she oversees her own garden.

When Bonton Farms founder Daron Babcock moved to Bonton in 2012, beets—or any fresh, non-frozen, non-canned vegetables for that matter—were nearly impossible to find nearby. Bonton is a food desert, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as an area without a full-service grocery store within a 1-mile radius. Babcock notes that it is a three-hour round-trip bus ride to the nearest grocery store, so most people in the community shop for food at convenience stores. The lack of fresh food, coupled with other factors, has led to many health problems. The occurrence of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, child obesity, and cancer in Bonton and the surrounding areas are more than 50% higher than the Dallas County average, according to research commissioned by

BONTON FARMS
6907 Bexar St.,
Dallas,
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bontonfarms.org





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Fresh eggs are a staple at Bonton Farms: Bonton Farms' café executive chef Jessica Stampley; Bonton Farms owners Daron and Theda Babcock.



finding and keeping jobs is a challenge.

As Babcock got to know his new neighbors, he invited them to share his front porch and read the Bible with him. Even though his neighbors were initially wary of a middle-class white man's presence in Bonton, the delegation eventually outgrew the porch and moved to a community center. To give everyone something to do and some food to take home, Babcock started a garden in the lot next to his house. In 2015, when larger acreage near the neighborhood became available, the mission of his garden took on a grander scale. Five years later, about 30 employees oversee the year-round farm, which now includes bee hives, herds of Nubian goats, Duroc and Mangalitsa hogs, and two Scottish Highland cows.

Patrick Wright, a Bonton Farms employee (no relation to Neka Wright), was one of the original Bonton residents who gathered on Babcock's front porch. "I helped Daron with the farm," he says. "In 2014, it was just a garden he had outside his house. He invited me to work there as a volunteer." Patrick's current situation is a world away from his former life dealing drugs in South Dallas. These days, he tends to the goats whose milk may be used in ice cream, ricotta cheese, or a latte served in Bonton Farms' adjacent café that opened in 2019. "Daron taught me how to cultivate healthy soil and provide the right nutrients, water, and position for seeds and plants," Patrick says. "As a result, we provide healthy food for our community."

Developing a résumé and job skills are major objectives at Bonton Farms. Once employees have experience under

the city of Dallas. Babcock and his wife, Theda Babcock, launched Bonton Farms in 2015 with the mission of providing fresh food and jobs.

"As a Christian and as an addict recovering, it is never too late to be redeemed," Babcock says of his decision to open Bonton Farms. "I have been a benefactor and been given a second chance to be redeemed. I now understand God creates us with a purpose."

After losing his first wife to cancer,

Babcock went down a dark road that included issues with drug abuse. In an attempt to build a new life for himself, he resigned from his job, sold his home in Frisco, and moved into an abandoned Habitat for Humanity house in Bonton.

The Bonton neighborhood has a painful history that includes segregation, violence, and poverty. Drug dealing, crime, and gun violence occur regularly in the area. Because a majority of Bonton's male residents have been incarcerated,

their belts, they can look for other job opportunities with confidence. Bonton Farms also has a food pantry, items available to purchase with food stamps, and a barter system: People can receive nutritious food in exchange for volunteer work, which Babcock refers to as “honorable exchanges.”


Even COVID-19 restrictions couldn't interrupt Bonton Farms' mission. When indoor dining temporarily closed at the café, its staff was reassigned to help the market supply fresh food via touchless curbside pickup or home delivery. The café eventually reopened with options like the famous “Mater” sandwich (fried green tomatoes topped with spiced pimento cheese) and the catfish po'boy with spicy, tangy comeback sauce.

Frequent café patron David Dean, a former Texas secretary of state, is one of the institution's strongest advocates. “In an amazingly short time, they have performed a miracle,” he says of the Babcocks. “Where there was no hope, there is now success and achievement.” The Babcocks are currently working with city officials to see if Bonton Farms' model could positively impact other neighborhoods.

But Babcock has not lost his focus on Bonton's residents. This past summer, he mentored Quincy Bradley, a former high school basketball star who got in a fistfight and was hospitalized with a gunshot wound inflicted by the disgruntled loser. After months of recovery, Bradley found Bonton Farms. “Farming saved my life and healed me from the inside out,” he says.

A few months ago, Babcock and Bradley were surveying stunted mad hatter, Fresno, and shishito peppers in a plot Bradley was overseeing for the first time. The culprit was an untested load of commercial compost that wasn't fully cured. As Bradley pointed to the wilted plants, he said almost inconsolably, “I put this down with my hands.”

Starting over with grace and dignity is another lesson learned at Bonton Farms. “We will plant some cover to restore the nitrogen in November for your winter garden,” Babcock reassured him. 🌱






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TEXANA



Fans of vinyl and the Westside Sound can get their fix at Janie's Record Shop in San Antonio.

Texas music is known for its sense of place, whether it's Western swing, guitar-powered electric blues, or Dirty South hip-hop. But at least one Texas city, and one specific part of that city, can claim a sound all its own: the Westside Sound of San Antonio.

The Westside Sound refers to a specific place and time, beginning in the 1950s, when Mexican American teenagers in San Antonio first heard rock 'n' roll. Budding musicians from across the city formed bands playing music that incorporated rhythm and blues, often with a heavy horn section, and influences of swing, conjunto, and country. Sometimes referred to as "Chicano Soul," the music drew on the early rock 'n' rollers from New Orleans like Fats Domino and emphasized slow-dance standards known as "bellyrubbers."

But unlike scenes in other places, the Westside Sound never completely went away. Its popularity persists thanks to veteran San Antonio musicians and fans championing their city's native sound. You can hear the influence of the Westside Sound in songs like "Hey Baby Kep Pa So," by enduring San Antonio keyboardist Augie Meyers, and in the music of younger musicians such as Los Texmaniacs, Garrett T. Capps, Mitch Webb and the Swindles, Adrian Quesada, and Jonny Benavidez.

One of the local fans keeping the Westside Sound alive is Chris Varelas, a retired firefighter who operates the NoHitNetwork.com website and KCJV 97.9—a low-power FM radio station based in Leon Valley in northwest San Antonio. Featuring non-charting regional releases from the 1950s through the '70s—or "The Greatest Sounds You've

Searching for the Westside Sound

Sixty years ago, San Antonio teenagers invented a style that thrives to this day

By Joe Nick Patoski

Never Heard Of”—the station plays a whole lot of Westside Sound records.

“The Westside Sound is to San Antonio what Motown is to Detroit,” Varelas says. “The sound is unique and immediately identifiable. It’s really hard to convey the impact of a few local high school teenagers who decided to sing and dream.”

In the 1950s, San Antonio was far enough out of the mainstream, geographically and culturally, to foster a scene from local radio stations playing records by local bands. Only a few of those recordings—notably “Talk to Me” by Sunny and the Sunliners and “She’s About a Mover” by the Sir Douglas Quintet—made it onto the national charts. Still, radio airplay and jukebox spins made regional stars out of groups such as Rudy and the Reno Bops, the Royal Jesters, the Dell Kings, Sonny Ace y Los Twisters, the Dreamliners, the Commands, the Mar-Kays, and Charlie and the Jives.

Arturo “Sauce” Gonzalez was an early member of Sunny and the Sunliners in 1962. He later played Hammond B-3 organ with the late Doug Sahn, and today he leads Sauce Gonzalez and the Westside Sound.

“My band is called the Westside Sound and even I have a hard time explaining it,” he jokes. But, he says, a hallmark of the sound is simplicity.

“We used to play R&B tunes by Fats Domino, Little Richard, Smiley Lewis, B.B. King, Little Willie John, and lots of other Black artists,” he says. “We Chicanos from the Westside would rearrange the music for two tenor saxophones and piano. And it was very important to play the triplets. Playing them by ear rather than reading charts was the Westside Sound, too.”

The “Westside Sound” didn’t really exist as a moniker until 1983, long after the music’s heyday. That’s when Sahn, a San Antonio-born musical prodigy who made his mark on the sound with the Sir Douglas Quintet, released an album with Meyers titled *The ‘West Side’ Sound Rolls Again*.

“That’s the first mention,” Jason

Longoria says, pointing to the cover of the album in the music room of his San Antonio home. “No one knew what to call it until then.”

Longoria, 42, is another local keeping the Westside Sound alive through collecting records and sharing his research with the world. “The musicians came from all over San Antonio,” he adds. “But the Westside is the heart.”

“The Westside Sound is to San Antonio what Motown is to Detroit. The sound is unique and immediately identifiable.”

San Antonio’s Westside, the oldest urban Mexican American neighborhood in Texas, is the historic hub of the city’s Hispanic culture. After World War II, two record labels, Rio Records and Corona Records, showcased the music of the working-class neighborhood.

Corona recorded traditional Spanish music ensembles. Rio Records issued records by young Mexican Americans playing all kinds of sounds. “Rio Records was to San Antonio what Sun Records was to Memphis,” Longoria says. “All these people had an opportunity to make a record. Rio Records owner Hymie Wolf would record anyone who came in, press up copies, and service jukebox distributors and radio stations with copies. He didn’t dictate what people should sing or play.”

Longoria collects recordings and ephemera documenting the era. He has also sought out old performers and even



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A Westside Sound Playlist:

“I’m Trying to Forget,”
The Kool Dips, 1960

“Why Why Why,” Doug Sahn
and the Mar-Kays, 1960

“Golly Gee,” Sunny and
the Sunglows, 1962

“Anymore,” Sonny Ace and
the Twisters, 1965

“What To Do,” Little Henry and
the Laveers, 1963

“Together Again,” Rudy and
the Reno Bops, 1964

“Talk to Me,” Sunny and
the Sunliners, 1963

“Ain’t No Big Thing,” Little Jr.
Jesse and the Teardrops, 1966

Listen online at
texashighways.com/westsidesound



FROM TOP: The mural *La Música de San Antonio* on West Commerce Street; Jason Longoria and Robert Esparza at Janie’s Record Shop.

gotten a few of them back on stage, including Rudy Tee Gonzalez, the lead singer from Rudy and the Reno-Bops; and Little Sammy Jay (Jaramillo), featured vocalist from the storied Tiffany Lounge club.

Longoria, who works at H-E-B’s corporate headquarters for his day job, developed his obsession through his

parents’ love of the Texas Tornados, the 1990s Tex-Mex supergroup consisting of Sahn, Meyers, Freddy Fender, and Flaco Jiménez—all pioneers of the sound.

“When that first album came out, my parents would tell me about Doug Sahn and all the guys coming from around here,” Longoria says. “Doug Sahn stuck with me because he was local, very eclectic, and played a mixed bag of stuff that I related to.”

Longoria’s research traces the origins of the Westside Sound to the merging of two bands, Conjunto San Antonio Alegre and Conjunto Mexico, which joined forces as Mando and the Chili Peppers in 1955. As the players traded their bajo sextos and accordions for electric gui-

tars, their music transitioned from polkas and rancheras to rock ‘n’ roll and Louisiana blues. They were also hearing music from local Black blues musicians, a scene with 1940s roots in the Keyhole Club, which advertised itself as “the First Integrated Night Club in the South.”

Mando and the Chili Peppers toured around the country, playing cities like Las Vegas, Denver, New York, and Philadelphia, where they appeared on the popular *American Bandstand* TV show. Back in San Antonio, the band had its own television show on KCOR, first with Spanish-speaking emcees and then with Scratch Phillips, a Black disc jockey.

On the Road With Rock ‘N Roll, the band’s 1957 debut album, improb-

ably fused country, conjunto, R&B, and triplet-powered rock 'n' roll. The playlist incorporated songs from Ernest Tubb's "I'm Walkin' the Floor Over You," to the popular standard "South of the Border," to "San Antonio Rose" by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.

"San Antonio has got its own version of pretty much all of American music," Longoria says.

And, it's got music that no other place can claim. **L**

Finding the Westside Sound

On the radio, DJ Chris Varelas plays Westside Sound bands on his station 97.9 FM in San Antonio and online at nohitnetwork.com. Legendary San Antonio DJ Henry "Pepsi" Peña hosts the San Antonio Oldies show Sundays 6-9 p.m. on Radio Jalapeño, KEDA 1540 AM, 102.3 FM, and saoldies.com.

In the clubs, see live performances by Westside Sound bands including Sauce Gonzalez and the Westside Sound, the Westside Horns, Joe Jama, Frank Rodarte, Al Gomez, Little Henry, Chente Montes, Jack Barber, and Urban Urbano at venues including The Squeezebox, Sanchos, and The Lighthouse Lounge. facebook.com/thesqueezebox; sanchosmx.com; facebook.com/the-lighthouse-lounge-100242124663964

On TV, hear strains of the Westside Sound on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* Cleto Escobedo III leads the house band, which includes his father, Cleto Escobedo Jr., a saxophonist and founding member of San Antonio's Dell-Kings.

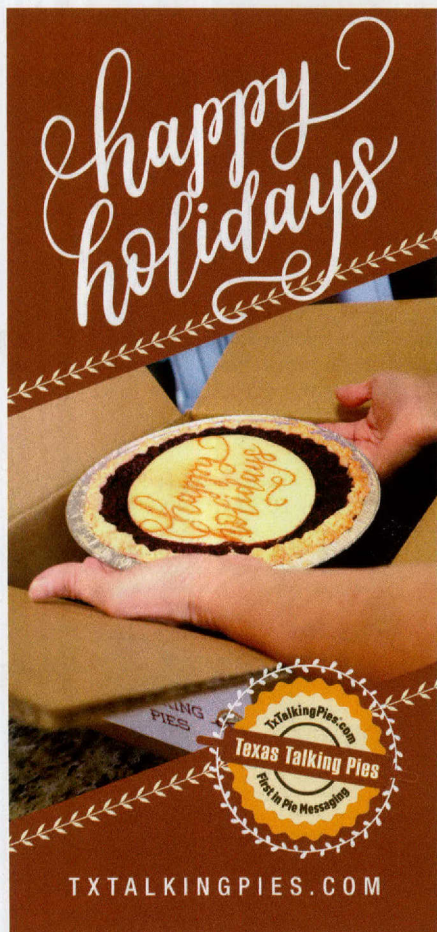
In the shops, find Westside Sound recordings at Janie's Record Shop, 1012 Bandera Road, and Del Bravo Record Shop, 554 Enrique M. Barrera Parkway. facebook.com/janiesrecordshop4; delbravorecordshop.com

On display, in David Blanca's mural, entitled *La Música de la San Anto*, 1303 W. Commerce St., and in exhibits at the South Texas Museum of Popular Culture. texpopsa.org

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THE DAYTRIPPER'S TOP 5

McKinney

A midsize city with small-town charm

BY CHET GARNER



Many folks think of McKinney as just another DFW suburb, but no matter how close McKinney is to Big D, it's worthy of a day trip all its own. McKinney has history, a lively square, and plenty of personality to keep a traveler entertained and well-fed all day long.

Collin County History Museum

Pioneer Collin McKinney was such a pivotal figure that the county took his first name and the town took his last name—an accolade not even Sam Houston or Davy Crockett can claim. This museum sits inside the old 1911 post office and mixes new technology with treasured artifacts to create an interactive history lesson. With the touch of an iPad, old photos morph into modern landscapes. Be sure to explore the basement, complete with an old boiler and schoolroom antiques.

The Yard

You'll find one of the best restaurants in town just blocks from the square. Situated in an old house with seating in the three-quarter acre out back, The Yard is where locals come to eat delicious Texas ranch food, drink local craft beer, and play cornhole and outdoor pingpong. Grab a plate of waffle fries smothered with pulled pork and queso, and pass the hours just like you were in your own backyard—but with way better food.

Heritage Village at Chestnut Square

On two city blocks sit more than half a dozen historic homes and buildings, including the 1854 Faires House, the oldest house in McKinney. These structures come

alive with reenactors demonstrating everything from how to blacksmith a horseshoe to how to whip up an old-fashioned peach cobbler. If you have a sweet tooth, check out the world's largest collection of ice cream freezers inside the old general store. For a walk on the spooky side, go on a guided ghost tour—just be prepared to lose sleep that night.

Heard Natural Science Museum and Wildlife Sanctuary

Defy urban sprawl by heading to this roughly 300-acre sanctuary filled with hiking trails, ponds, and towering trees. An indoor museum features rescue animals and exhibits on dinosaurs, the solar system, and everything a science nerd like me could want. If you need to kick your day into high gear, head to the ropes course and see if you have the guts to climb the giant ladder or conquer the power pole.

Local Yocal BBQ and Grill

While this local butcher shop smokes a mean brisket, the menu goes far beyond the typical three-meat plate. Kick off your dinner with some amazing smoked red-pepper pimento cheese, then move to a dry-aged 20-ounce bone-in wagyu rib-eye cooked to perfection. Finally, wash it down with a single-barrel bourbon and a slice of banana pudding pie. It's not traditional Texas barbecue, but that ain't a bad thing!

**So whether you follow my footsteps or forge your own path,
I hope to see you on the road.**

*Chet Garner is the host of The Daytripper® travel show on PBS.
To view the McKinney episode visit thedaytripper.com.
Follow along on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @chetripper.*



Tenacious Kim

Baylor basketball coach Kim Mulkey confronts unpredictable times with proven success

By Chad Conine

Kim Mulkey has been a dominating figure in women's college basketball since before many of the players she coaches at Baylor University were born.

A native of Tickfaw, Louisiana, Mulkey was the starting point guard on Louisiana Tech University's team that won back-to-back national titles in 1981 and '82. As an assistant coach at her alma mater, she helped the Lady Techsters win another championship in 1988. But Mulkey has made her biggest impression as head coach of the Baylor Lady Bears, winning national titles in 2005, 2012, and 2019.

With teams known for defensive tenacity and strong post play, Mulkey followed the 2019 title by notching her 600th win as a head coach in February. At age 58, she reached that mark faster than any other NCAA Division I coach—woman or man.

“What we had to do was change the perception of whether Baylor was committed to an elite program. When we started winning, we changed that.”

The Lady Bears won their 10th straight Big 12 championship in 2020 and were preparing for another run at the national title when COVID-19 shut down the sports world last spring. Despite the truncated season, Mulkey got some good news in April when she was elected to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony in Uncasville, Connecticut—postponed to May 2021—will feature Mulkey alongside a star-studded class including Kobe Bryant and Tim Duncan.

Away from the court, Mulkey enjoys working in her yard and spending time with her two adult children and her grandson. Her daughter, Makenzie Fuller, played at Baylor and is now the program's associate director of operations. Mulkey says she puts a premium on family, even with the pressures of an elite coaching job. “I tell my kids, ‘When y’all are

looking at me in that casket, you can't say, "Mom put her career ahead of us."

When her Lady Bears won the championship in 2005, Mulkey became the first person to win a college basketball national crown as a player, assistant coach, and head coach. "I've been very fortunate," Mulkey says. "I played at one place, and I had the opportunity to coach at two. But I've only coached as a head coach at one institution, and that's Baylor."

Q: Do you view yourself as a transplanted Louisianan or adopted Texan?

A: I don't know that there's much difference. I'm a Louisiana girl and always will be. I've been in Texas 20 years, and so I consider Texas my home, and my kids were raised here. Nonetheless, 38 years of my life were spent in Louisiana. Home is wherever I am, and my home is in Waco.

Q: What are some of the biggest changes you've see in Waco in 20 years here?

A: I'll start with Baylor. University Parks Drive—I don't even recognize University Parks Drive. There's just so much development, so many new buildings, not even to talk about the new [football] stadium on campus. Just to watch the development all over Waco and how it has grown and the downtown area and the suburbs, the places outside of the downtown area. Everything is just hopping around Waco in the last 20 years.

Q: Has Waco's growth made it easier to recruit players to come here?

A: I don't think the town was a negative or a positive when I got here 20 years ago. I think what we had to fix was winning. We had to move from the bottom to become a competitive team. Education at Baylor sold itself. Never ever have we had to sell a quality degree from Baylor. I think location has always been a positive. You're centrally located in the middle of the state. What we had to do was change the perception of whether Baylor was committed to an elite program. We had joined a Power Five conference. When we started winning, we changed that perception.

Q: How important is recruiting players from Texas, a state known for good high school basketball?

A: Geographically, I mean just look at our state, how large we are. It takes 11 hours to get from one side of the state to the other side of the state. Just imagine all the kids that play basketball. We're going to continue to recruit the state. We'll get some of those kids, and we'll lose some of those kids just because there are so many good programs in our state.

Q: You joke with the media about singing old-school country songs a lot. Is that a big interest of yours?

A: I never liked country music growing up, but it's what I heard from my family. I would tune it out because I was either studying or playing ball. And then as I got older, and I would be on the road recruiting, driving late at night and just searching on the radio, I would listen to a song and think, "Gosh, if you listen to the words of country music, it brings back moments in your life that you can relate to." I think that's how I got started listening to country music. Some of these songs I can just belt out and sing.

Q: You've said you like to garden in your free time. What do you get out of it?

A: I just love to see a finished product. When I am out in my yard and planting flowers and pulling weeds and mowing the yard or weed-eating, you just can back up and in that moment you can see beauty. Also, you're away from the telephone. It's relaxing.

Q: Do you have any kind of feel for how the new basketball season will look?

A: I understand that our normal is going to be different. I just don't know what the future holds. I have to believe what I was raised to believe—that through all the trials and tribulations, this too shall pass. "When" is the question that all of us are asking every day. I know that I'm a rule-follower, and I'm trying my best to abide by what we've been told to do as a country and at Baylor. I miss what we knew and have known as our normal life.

Q: How does the team regain the momentum to chase another championship?

A: I feel like we have unfinished business. I feel like there was no closure to our season. I just want to gather my kids in the locker room and be able to hug their necks. It's almost like you have to finish up last year before you even start a new year. You don't have those four seniors with you, but you have the returning players. It's like we have to close out what last year was.

Q: What's your reaction to being selected for the Hall of Fame?

A: I just reflect. I think about how I even got into coaching, how fortunate I was to be around the best in the business that impacted my life, both as a player at Louisiana Tech and as an assistant coach there, and then the chance that Tom Stanton [Baylor's former athletic director] took on me when they hired me. He probably could've had any head coach that he wanted at the time.

And, I think about my players a lot. I think about the ones that took a chance when we didn't have a product to sell. They came because of other things, and they opened doors for us as a staff to get into recruits' homes. And then winning the championship so quickly like we did. And then the community embracing women's basketball. It's been a remarkable, consistent run. That's the word that I use is that we are "consistently" relevant. ■

The Baylor Lady Bears opened practice for the 2020-21 season in October. The season, set to begin in November, is subject to pandemic-related schedule changes. baylorbears.com/sports/womens-basketball

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