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OF TEXAS

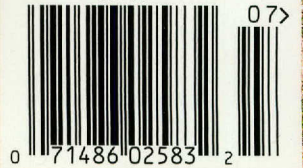
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FIND SERENITY ON THE NUECES AND
OTHER WATERWAYS LESS TRAVELED



JULY 2020

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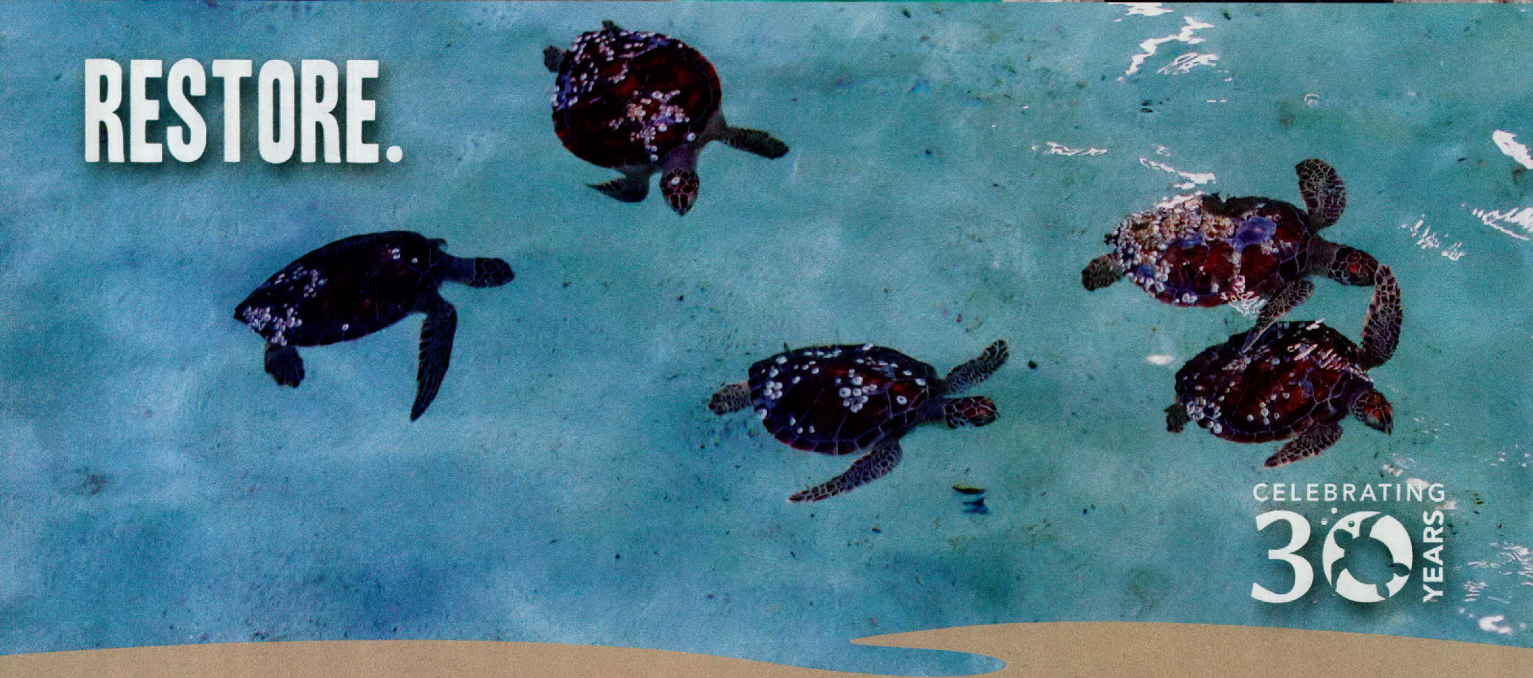






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EDITOR'S
NOTE

Stepping Out

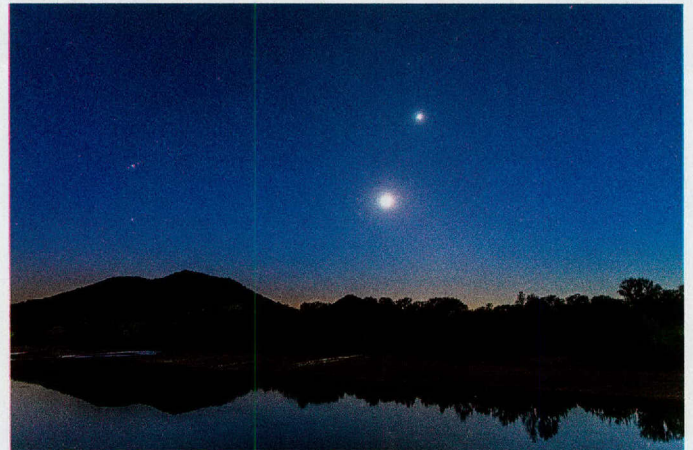
After nearly three months cooped up at home without traveling much farther than our local grocery stores, our staff is looking forward to future trips to some of our favorite Texas spots as well as exploring new ones.

The first time I saw this month's cover photo of the crystal-clear Nueces River, I immediately added it to the top of our family's bucket list. After you've finished reading writer-at-large Joe Nick Patoski's excellent portrait of the river and its environs, starting on Page 44, I'm betting you'll want to add it to yours, too. Here's where some of our other staff members are setting their sights:

Tyson Bird, Digital Strategies Manager: I'm looking forward to visiting a region of Texas I've spent very little time in, but have always wanted to explore: the Panhandle. As a frequent visitor and volunteer in Texas state parks, I've long wanted to camp in Caprock Canyons and Palo Duro.

Julia Jones, Assistant Editor: When I can, I'll be heading into the wilderness of the Piney Woods with a novel, a hammock, and some binoculars. Hiking through the pines in Sam Houston National Forest is the most engaged my senses have ever been. The air is different in East Texas; there's nothing like it.

Matt Joyce, Senior Managing Editor: Having been largely deprived of camping during our lovely springtime, I jumped when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department reopened its camping



Fed by headsprings on the Edwards Plateau, the Nueces River wends for 315 miles, mainly through rural Texas. Here, the river is shown just north of Camp Wood, located on the western edge of the Hill Country.

reservation system in late May. Scouring the department's website, I lucked out and found open sites in the coming weeks at three family favorites: Lost Maples, Kickapoo Caverns, and the Davis Mountains. Saddle up!

Natalie Moore, Product and Engagement Manager: I have always been into rock climbing. In college, I was an instructor at a summer camp. Our April 2020 issue inspired me to plan a trip out to Hueco Tanks State Park one day. Bouldering is not my strong suit, but I'm willing to give it a shot.

What Texas destinations are you most looking forward to visiting again or for the first time? Send us an email at letters@texashighways.com and let us know.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emily R Stone". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

EMILY ROBERTS STONE
EDITOR IN CHIEF



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be home.**

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JULY

36

In Search of Half-Forgotten Rivers

Tracing Texas rivers from their sources, two longtime friends revel in the joy of discovery as they document the little-known James and Pease rivers.

*By Michael Barnes and Joe Starr
Photographs by Erich Schlegel*

44

Shhh...This Just Might Be the Prettiest Body of Water in Texas

Most river enthusiasts don't make it far enough west to reach the Nueces, the Hill Country's westernmost river. But those who do are met with a crystal-clear oasis complete with friendly locals and a vibrant multicultural history.

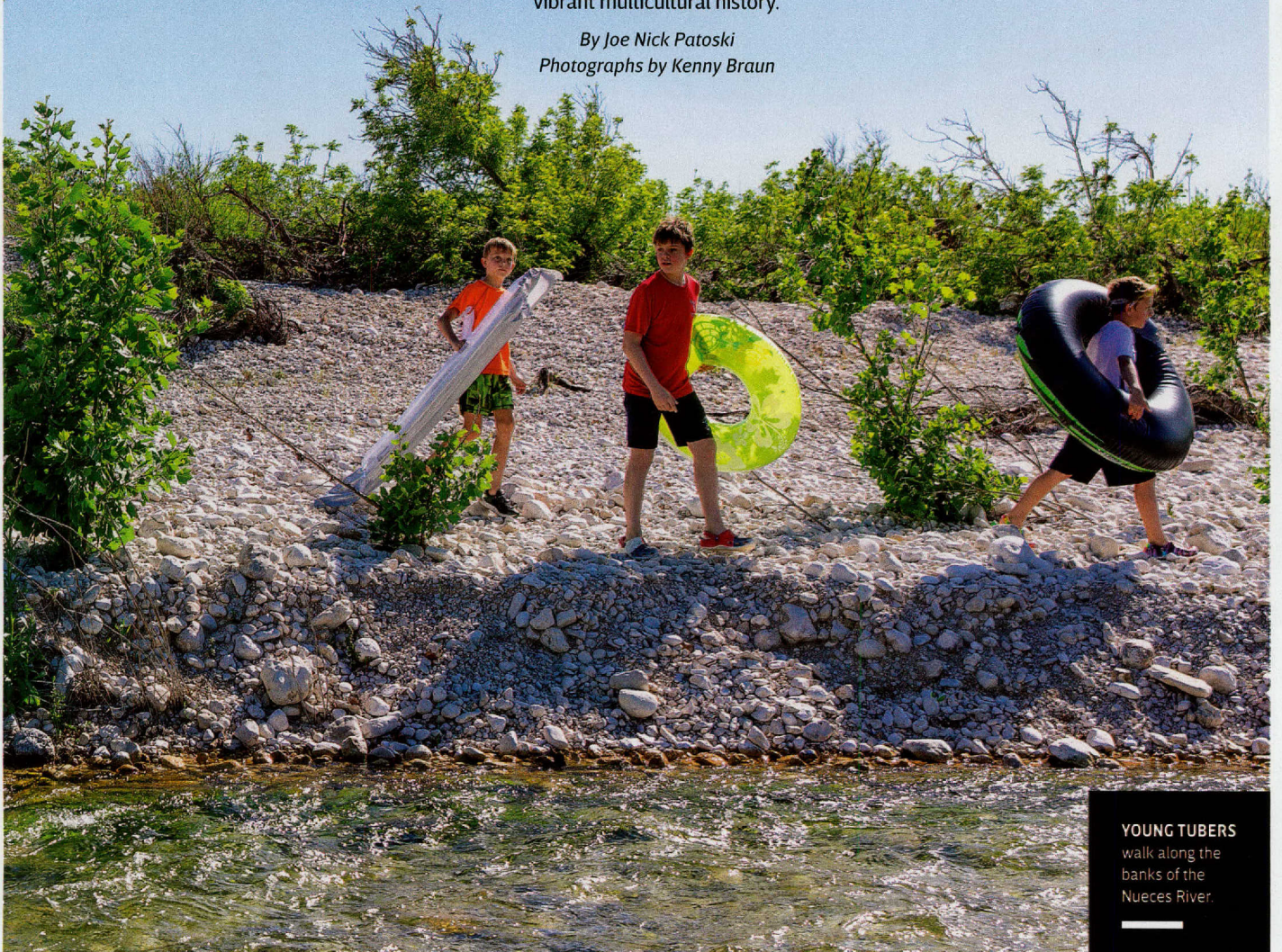
*By Joe Nick Patoski
Photographs by Kenny Braun*

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The Lower Canyons

A seven-day expedition through the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande offers adventure, solitude, historical perspective, and more beautiful photos than we know what to do with.

*By Matt Joyce
Photographs by Laurence Parent*



YOUNG TUBERS
walk along the
banks of the
Nueces River.

A dramatic landscape photograph of a canyon. In the foreground, a large, layered rock formation stands prominently. The sun is setting behind a cliff on the left, creating a bright glow and long shadows. The sky is filled with scattered clouds. In the distance, a valley with green vegetation is visible. Two small figures of people are standing on a ledge of the rock formation in the middle ground.

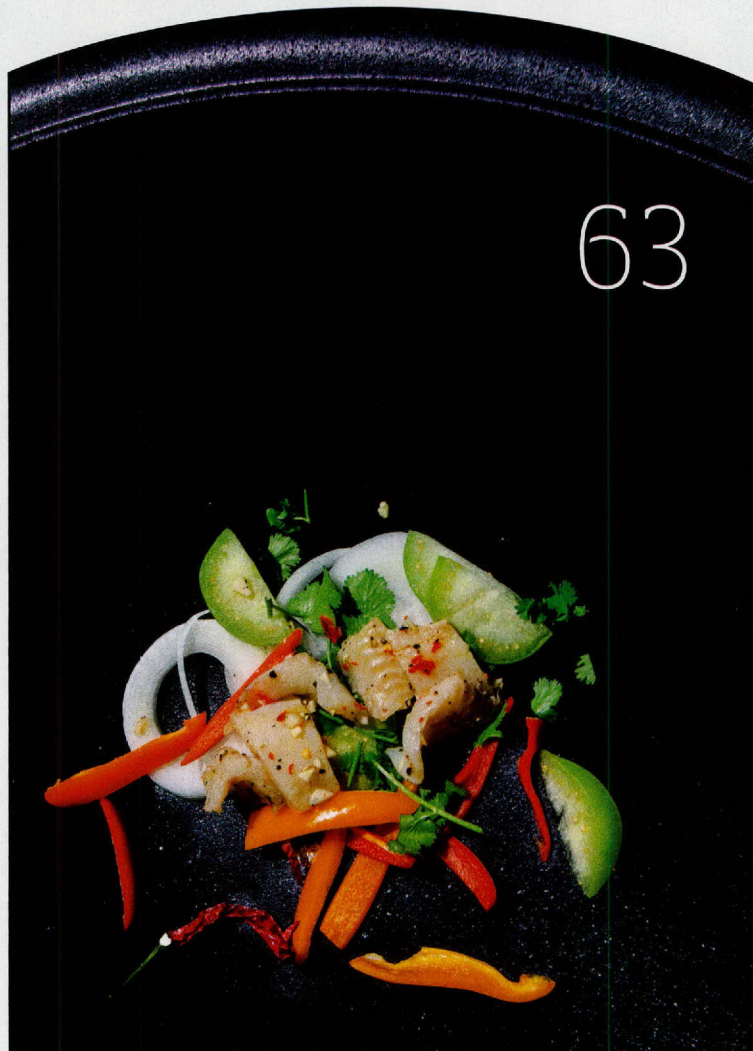
Stay safe but dream big.

Better days are coming. So start planning, start dreaming, and get excited about discovering Texas all over again at ttia.org/lifesbetter.



Life's better in a State of travel.

JULY



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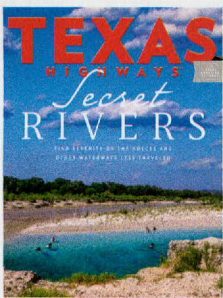
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ON THE COVER

Photo by Kenny Braun
Shot at the Quince swimming
hole on the Nueces River

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Behind the Story



Michael Barnes and Joe Starr, the co-authors of this month's feature "In Search of Forgotten Rivers" (Page 36), have taken road trips together since attending the University of Houston in the 1970s. They started tracing Texas rivers before GPS was in widespread use; Barnes, who writes for the *Austin American-Statesman*, says they let the rivers be their guides. "In terms of tracing them, if you're doing it by car and on foot, you're seeing Texas in a completely different way," he says. "We really got to know those backroads that most people never get to take." The feature, along with "A Return to the River," a July 2018 story by *Texas Highways* writer-at-large Clayton Maxwell, will be included in the forthcoming anthology *Viva Texas Rivers! Literary Portraits of the Waterways that Connect Us All*, from The Wittliff Collections Literary Series. The anthology, edited by Steven L. Davis and Sam L. Pfister, is expected to be published in fall 2021 by Texas A&M University Press.

Featured Contributors



Laurence Parent

Parent loves exploring little-known corners of Texas like the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande, which he photographed for the feature "The Lower Canyons" (Page 54). "Rain, sleet, and mud made my trip challenging, but I enjoyed seeing and photographing such a remote and spectacular place," he says. Parent has published more than 40 books on outdoors subjects across the country, including many on Texas. In the last three years, he has updated two of his bestselling books, *Hiking Texas* for Falcon Guides and *Official Guide to Texas State Parks and Historic Sites* for University of Texas Press.



Suzy Spencer

A native of Lufkin, Spencer's East Texas upbringing informed her essay "Slaloming to Freedom" (Page 16). "I can't recall reporting and writing a story that has brought me as much joy, beauty, inspiration, and peace as my essay on Lake Sam Rayburn," says Spencer, a journalist and author of five nonfiction books. "I want to go back there again, and someday, I will." Her books include the *New York Times* bestseller *Wasted*; *Breaking Point*, the story of Houston mother Andrea Yates; and the memoir *Secret Sex Lives: A Year on the Fringes of American Sexuality*.

Photos: Erich Schlegel (top); Laurence Parent (middle); Kenny Braun (bottom)

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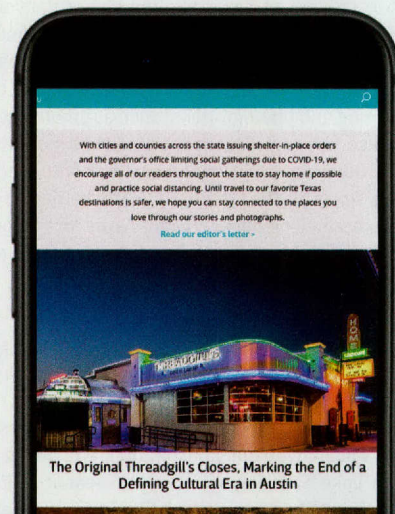
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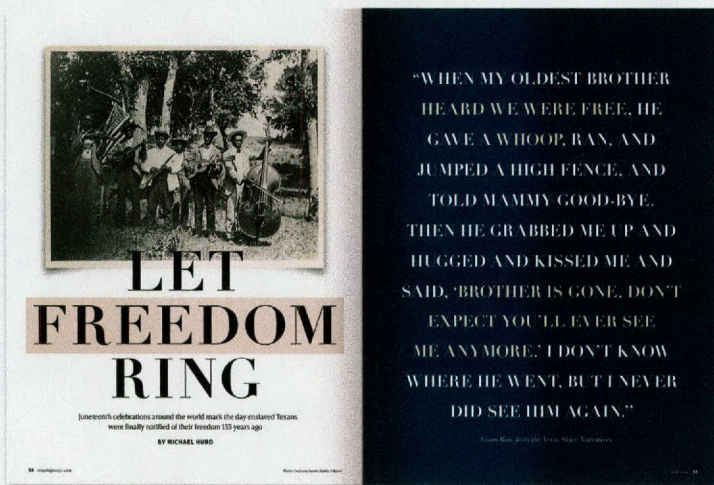


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“WHEN MY OLDEST BROTHER HEARD WE WERE FREE, HE GAVE A WHOOP, RAN, AND JUMPED A HIGH FENCE, AND TOLD MAMMY GOOD-BYE. THEN HE GRABBED ME UP AND HUGGED AND KISSED ME AND SAID, ‘BROTHER IS GONE. DON’T EXPECT YOU’LL EVER SEE ME ANYMORE.’ I DON’T KNOW WHERE HE WENT, BUT I NEVER DID SEE HIM AGAIN.”

Thank you for the enlightening article by Michael Hurd about Juneteenth in Texas (and beyond) in your June issue, and thank you, Mr. Hurd, for sharing your personal memories, history, and experiences, which added depth and color to the important historical information.

Martha Tuzson Stockton, Austin

On the Road

You cannot go to Hico [“Back to Your Routes,” May] without stopping at the Koffee Kup Family Restaurant for some of their amazing pies!

@saraleejam

Texas Water Safari

We have been team captains for our son for five or six safaris [“River’s Edge,” May], and it’s almost as grueling as it is for the paddlers. You are in a constant hurry to fix their water and food and meet them at all the checkpoints, and there’s little sleeping.

@mamcrow56

Slowpoke Farm Market

Joy always has a big welcoming smile, and Kerry makes the *best* pies. If you haven’t been to Slowpoke [“Taking it Slow,” May], you are seriously missing out.

Alyssa Reeves, Cisco

Shhh...

I found George Getschow’s article on silence [“Escaping the Noise,” June] very observant of our busy, noisy lives today. Right now, sitting on our back porch, I can hear the clicking sounds of the dog’s toenails on the pool deck, the metal clamps on the American flag clanging on the flagpole, the chirping of the birds, the traffic traveling down the boulevard near our house, the neighbor mowing his yard, and more. We really don’t live in the solitude of our surroundings as Getschow discovered. But how tranquil this environment has been for me. The author brings this awareness to his readers.

Pam Price, Grapevine

Texas Leaguer Legacy

Your article “Rough and Tumble” in the June issue surely hit a home run with the Aten family of Texas. Uncle Frank Aten

played semipro baseball around the San Antonio area and along the Mexican border in the early 1900s. Known as “Kid Nitro” among his player buddies, the skills he acquired served him well when he was captured while serving in the U.S. Army during WWII. Serving time in solitary confinement, when he wasn’t playing sandlot and team-based baseball with fellow POWs, he used his coveted ball and glove for entertainment. Zipped within his jacket at all other times, they served as warmth and protection.

Ann Rogers, Flower Mound

The article about the Texas League brought back old memories. I grew up in the ‘50s in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. I would catch the bus and ride to Burnett Field to see the Dallas Eagles play baseball. In 1952 I saw Dave Hoskins pitch. He was the first African American to play in

the Texas League. He won 22 games that year. The 1953 year was a big one. The Eagles were crowned champions after winning the series four games to two. In my old foot locker in my tool shed, I have two detailed scrapbooks of the Eagles’ 1956 and 1957 seasons. I tell people the only professional sports team in Dallas in the ‘50s was the Dallas Eagles.

Sam C. Davis, Dallas

License to Drive

Your [May] issue’s Vintage photo brought back a fond memory. While former Gov. Coke Stevenson and his family were enjoying their view of the Davis Mountains, I noticed the decal on the rear window of his ‘58 Ford. Cars rolling off the Ford plant in the Dallas area back then bore identical decals placed in the same location. They read, “Built in Texas by Texans.”

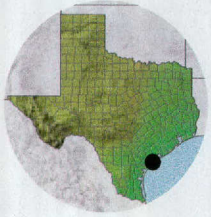
Mike Everett, Leawood, Kansas



A Dam Fine Respite

Photographer Kenny Braun discovered Wes Cooksey Park in Uvalde County while on assignment for this month's feature story about the Nueces River (Page 44). "A local recommended that I check it out," said Braun, who is based in Austin, "and it was indeed a great place to hang out, swim, and take in the beauty." Located just north of State Highway 55, the park sits on the Nueces where a dam forms a spring-fed lake. The photo "has kind of a surreal quality because of my location under the bridge and the unique view of the river," he said. In the summer, this same spot is often packed with people swimming, tubing, and paddling.





Rockport-Fulton

Laura Brown feeds the resilience of the community that raised her

By Julia Jones





TOWN TRIVIA



POPULATION:

12,000



NUMBER OF STOPLIGHTS:

13



YEAR FOUNDED:

1866



NEAREST CITY:

Corpus Christi,
33 miles south



MARQUEE EVENTS:

Rockport Art Festival,
July 4-5; HummerBird
Celebration, Sept. 17-20;
Rockport Film Festival,
Nov. 12-15



MAP IT:

Hu-Dat and
Benchwarmers,
61 Broadway St., Fulton

For Laura Brown, running a restaurant in the Gulf Coast community of Rockport-Fulton is all about building and rebuilding. Since she was a teenager in the 1990s, she has worked at Hu-Dat, a favorite spot for Asian food and an anchor of the local Vietnamese community. Brown became part of the Hu-Dat family when she married her childhood sweetheart, Binh Nguyen, and the couple took over the restaurant from Nguyen's parents in 2013. In 2017, Brown and Nguyen, who have two children, opened Benchwarmers in the same building as Hu-Dat. The sports pub quickly became a popular stop for locals along with the retirees, sport fishermen, and birdwatchers who flock to Aransas Bay on vacation. Just months later, Hurricane Harvey destroyed Hu-Dat and damaged Benchwarmers. Brown and Nguyen reopened Benchwarmers within a few months, serving free food to emergency responders. But it took two years to rebuild Hu-Dat, which reopened late last year. Then, in March, the COVID-19 pandemic forced both restaurants to shutter temporarily (both have reopened). After all that, "I'm not building another restaurant," Brown says with a tired laugh. But she's happy to run the ones she has.

We Are Family

"I love this town. I was born and raised here. We know our customers. I love the fact that they can come in and we already know what they want. It just feels like family. The community—the way that everybody came together after Harvey and helped us out—I want to be a part of that. I would never want to be away from that."

Young Love

"Binh and I were in the same grade, and we had the same friends. We were in eighth grade when we actually hung out, and for some reason he was able to drive his dad's shrimper truck to school—he didn't have a license or anything—and after school he would take me to Dairy Queen. We've been together since."

The Hu-Dat Name

"Binh's parents worked so hard to build up that name and give good food, and that's what brought everybody in. We took over Hu-Dat, but Mom and Dad were still in the kitchen, so the food was still going to be the same. We learned a lot from them. When we took over, it was scary, but we knew people were going to come because Binh's parents put out a good name in the town."

Rockport Strong

"Seeing the [hurricane] damage, that's a feeling that I don't even know if I can describe. That's our livelihood; it's our home. It was really heart-breaking. There was really nothing we could do but come back and clean up and rebuild.

'Rockport Strong' means we all come together and help each other out no matter what. I already see that support now with COVID-19. When we rebuilt Hu-Dat, I had it really big on the wall, 'Rockport Strong.' And on the Benchwarmers side of the restaurant, we have it in chalk in there too. When people see it, I think they feel like family, and they feel comfortable and that we're all in this together."

Location, Location, Location

"We have a really nice, clean beach. If you want to go fishing or go run near the water, we have that option. It's literally a minute down the street. I love that we're a tourist town. We have regulars that don't live here and just come down during the summer, and we know them like they're born and raised here."

The Next Generation

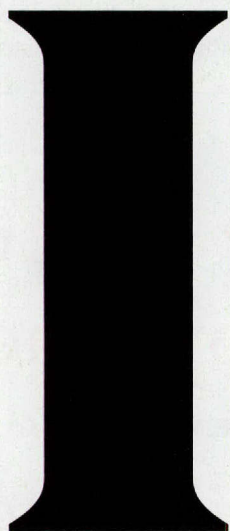
"We grew up in the restaurant business. My kids grew up in the restaurant business. Even our young nieces and nephews are like, 'I can't wait until I can come down and work.' It's exciting because that's our life. It's good to see them excited about it. Our nieces and nephews, some of them who live in Houston will come for the summer and work. My brother- and sister-in-law say, 'Put them to work.' So, when they come down, they go to work, and I pay them, and they love it—well, that's what they say."



Slaloming to Freedom

On Lake Sam Rayburn, a mother teaches her daughter how to persevere

By Suzy Spencer



I don't have to close my eyes to go there in my mind.

I didn't close them when I was sitting in the second row of my grandmother's funeral while my mind's eye watched the summer breeze ripple the surface of Lake Sam Rayburn, my lime-green O'Brien slalom ski slapping against the water.

I felt the tug on my arms and my shoulders as I leaned hard right to cut outside the wake, my ski and I becoming one. We lifted above the water as we jumped. I heard the clap as we landed again on the surface. I cut left and felt Rayburn razoring against my ankles. I zoomed back over the wake and watched our boat's spray rainbow over my head. I jumped the second wake, cut again, watched the spray, cut back, again and again until my arms and legs throbbled from the tension. But I couldn't stop skiing. If I

did, I'd cry, and I didn't want to cry at my grandmother's funeral.

I settled in my mind behind our blue and white Evinrude inboard/outboard boat, resting in the middle of the wake. I let myself be towed until I became bored. Then I looked down at the black boots of my ski, glanced right to check for tree stumps that dotted the lake, and then cut again—right, left, right, left, right. I did it until I knew I should just drop the ski rope and sink, slowly, safely into the water. But only quitters drop and cry, and my mother taught me to never quit, never cry, never let anyone see your weakness. She had to. When I was 5 years old and we were living in a decade when women couldn't get credit cards in their own names, my mom became a young widow with two children to rear.

So, I leaned in and cut harder, faster, deeper into the water, listening as my ski slapped harder, louder, until I cut so sharply that my spent arms, legs, and shoulders gave out, forcing me and my ski to slip. My right hip hit so hard against the water that my O'Brien and I separated. I somersaulted—one, two, three, maybe four times or more—deep into the lake, so deep that I didn't know where I was, which way was up, until I reminded myself to look for the sun.

Then I saw it—its rays shining through the brackish water. I swam toward the light. I popped the surface, looked for my ski, spotted it, swam to it, held it perpendicular to the sky, like a loblolly pine towering against the blue, and waited.

I waited, until I could go home again.

Lake Sam Rayburn was the only place in my native East Texas where I felt at home. In my high school years, it was where my mother stole a precious hour or two from work to spend time with me doing solely what I loved—water skiing. In college, it was where my mother trusted me enough to let me take my friends out on the lake, where I could pretend to be mature as I took command of the boat, slammed the throttle forward, and raced over the water, the wind beating against our faces and my soul soaring as high as the sky.

Nearly 45 years later, I still yearn for that home and long to relive those memories of love, freedom, and joy. Last fall, I returned to where I first dipped my toes into the lake at Hanks Creek, just a 15-minute drive on US 69 from my hometown of Lufkin to my mother's hometown of Huntington, followed by a winding 20-minute drive on Farm-to-Market Road 2109 to Farm-to-Market Road 2801. Known as Hanks Creek Marina back in the 1970s, it's where my family—my mother, sister, and aunt—put in our gray and yellow Evinrude, the boat that preceded the blue and white one.

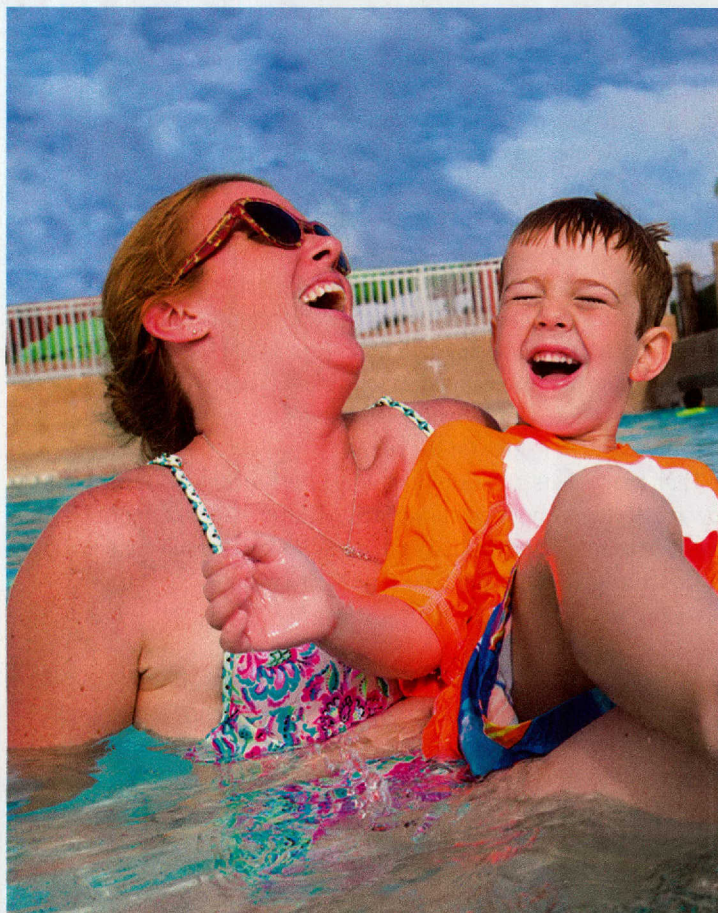
With the boat tied to the end of the dock—packed with a cooler full of Coca-Cola, a bucket of minnows, cartons of worms, fishing gear, and my Cypress Gardens Mustang water skis—we burned beneath the East Texas sun while we waited for my uncle to drive up in his air-conditioned Lincoln Continental. He'd

My uncle and the rest of my family only wanted to fish, while I begged and pleaded to ski. Finally, to shut me up, my uncle would toss my skis and me in the water.

park his car among the pickup trucks and empty boat trailers, still dripping water from putting in their boats, and stroll down to the ramp carrying only his tackle box as though it were his medical bag. He'd grin, jump in the boat, and say, "What took you so long?" Then he'd power up the engine like he was the captain of a luxury yacht.

He and the rest of my family only wanted to fish, while I begged and pleaded to ski. Finally, to shut me up, my uncle would toss my skis and me in the water. I'd slip my feet into the gray boots, grab the single-handle ski rope, watch my wooden skis knock together as the boat slowly pulled the rope taut, and pray that I could get up.

That's what I pictured as I drove through the Piney Woods last year. I was eager to return to the parking lot that was always packed, ready to walk out on the marina and listen to boats in their slips,



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their ropes squeaking with every wave, the sound of smooth engines at their slowest revolution as they eased through the no-wake zone.

Then I realized that every sign I passed said "Hanks Creek Park," not "Hanks Creek Marina." Was it gone?

I was probably 13 when I first came to Hanks Creek, and I didn't have the stamina to ski for long. After a few minutes, I'd fall from exhaustion, my body sinking into the water, and also my joy because I knew that one fall meant my family would go back to fishing.

Now I stand in an empty Hanks Creek parking lot. The wind rustles the trees, birds sing, water splashes softly against the shore. I can breathe for what seems like the first time in years. I am home.

There's no marina anymore, but there's a dock, a worn basketball court, the skeleton of a volleyball court, a play area for kids, campsites, and a woman, Medina Sharp, who was contracted to pick up litter in the park.


Medina tells me Hanks Creek started changing in the mid-1980s. The local rumor is that the marina's owners' bank note went south, the bank foreclosed on them, and one of the owners poisoned the marina's well system out of plain old meanness. But, again, that's only a rumor.

Next, I drive over to the Hanks Creek gatehouse. There, gate attendant Russell Knott tells me a tornado blew through in 1982, sank boats, and destroyed the marina. I guess that's what caused the bank note to go south, even though Russell's words aren't a confirmation. "That's when the Corps really got involved," he says.

In fact, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first became involved in 1956, when construction began on a dam across the Angelina River—a dam that had been authorized by Congress in 1945 to help flood control, create hydroelectric power, and provide water for municipal, industrial, agricultural, and recreational uses. When the lake filled up in 1968, Sam Rayburn Reservoir covered 114,500 surface acres and became the largest lake completely inside of Texas. Today, 22 parks and


FIELD GUIDE *to* BASTROP COUNTY

ISSUE No. 38



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private concessions dot the lake's 750-mile shoreline. Some of those are operated by surrounding counties, some by the U.S. Forest Service, and 10 of them, including Hanks Creek, are operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

According to Medina, the Corps spent several years cleaning up the Hanks Creek wells. The Corps also improved the boat ramp, restrooms, and bath-houses; built a picnic pavilion, 47 designated campsites, and eight screened-in shelters with tin roofs; and, as Russell describes, "turned this into an actual park where you make reservations." He points toward the woods. "There was a road that went way back in there and came out to a place called Sandy Beach. That's where everybody used to go and drink beer and get pretty wild."

That was back in the days when you could find any old camping site you like, he says, chain a chair to a tree on the site,

leave, come back a few hours later and still have your spot.

Like me, Russell seems nostalgic for the Hanks Creek of the past, but he's not. "This is a good family park," he says. The Corps shut down Sandy Beach and the beer parties long ago; now kids can ride their bicycles and no one's going to bother them. "This really truly is a jewel in East Texas," he says, "and I've been to every park here. This is the best."

"Why?"

"It has more waterfront camping spots than other sites," he says.

I glance over at one of the tiny, screened-in cabins, its tin roof covered in dry pine needles. I want to open the cabin's shutters, lean my slalom ski in a corner, set up a cot on the concrete floor, and lie there—after a hard day of skiing—listening to rain on the metal roof. Or maybe sit outside on the front porch, wieners roasting over the fire pit,

**As I sliced across
the wake, I chomped
my gum with the
rhythm of my ski.
The wind roared in
my ears and I
screamed, believing
no one but God
could hear my joy.**



watching fireflies flutter between the pines.

"And the fishing is great," Russell adds.

"Do people still water ski much?"

"Not like it used to be."

There's a 10-foot alligator living on campsite No. 37, as well as a bunch of four- and five-footers. But there are also eagles, which can be seen from campsite No. 26. "They'll swoop down, they'll pick up a fish, and then they'll go sit in a tree," Russell says.

I'm starting to like this Hanks Creek. But since I don't have a cot and will always prefer skiing over fishing, I steer my car toward Zavalla, where I get on State Highway 147 North, cross over Sam Rayburn, and take a left on Farm-to-Market Road 2851 to Jackson Hill Marina.

Jackson Hill was where I used to pop a stick of Trident cinnamon gum in my mouth, jump in the lake in my red ski vest, grab the tow rope, pull on my slalom, and yell, "Go!" The water here was broad and the tree stumps were few. As I sliced across the wake, I chomped my gum with the rhythm of my ski. The wind roared in my ears and I screamed, believing no one but God could hear my joy.

This is where my friends and I floated after skiing, slowly paddling in the warm water, searching for a cool spot where the river once ran. It's where we ate Tinsley's fried chicken, tossing the bones overboard, watching the grease cast pink and blue rings, and listening to the fish pop the surface as they lifted their lips to the food. It's where we filled our empty Coke cans with Rayburn and poured the liquid on the deck to cool our burning soles.

Now I stand on its bank, beneath trees hanging heavy with Spanish moss, staring at a heron trying to hide along the shore, and watching a lone fisherman sitting in his bass boat. I'm starving and quickly learn that Jackson Hill Lodge is the place to go if you want to taste a savory pulled pork sandwich and talk about bass fishing.

"There are around 400 organized bass tournaments on Rayburn every year," owner and chef Terry Sympson says. "It's

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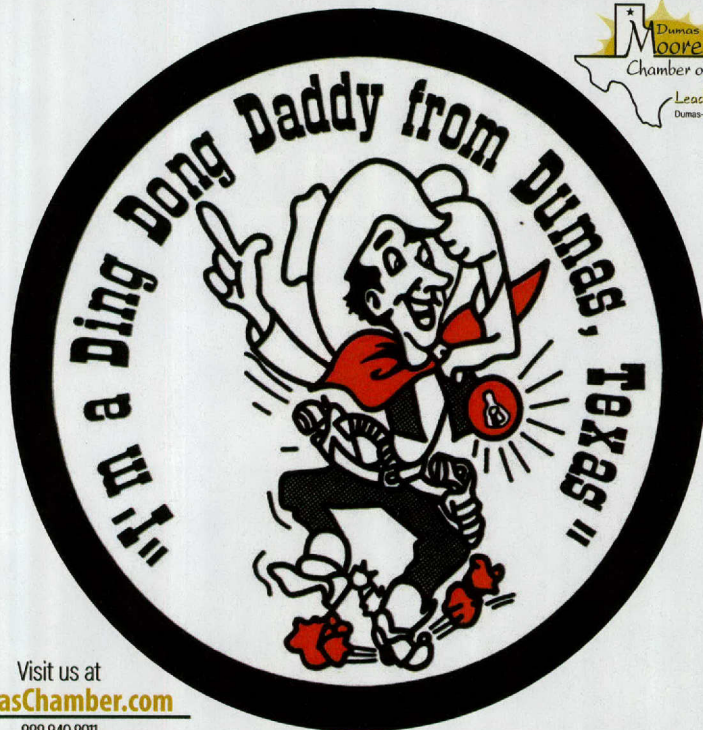
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the most in the United States. Around the country, if you talk to a bass fisherman and you say 'Rayburn,' they either say, 'Yeah, it's my favorite lake to fish,' or they'll say, 'It's on my bucket list.'"

But I want to know if people still water ski here. Even on the busiest summer weekends, Terry says, there are only a couple of skiers and wakeboarders. "It's the best kept secret," he says and shushes me not to tell anyone.

I look through the lodge's window and out to the water. In my mind, I see my smiling friends, who, like me, only wanted to ski. Go!

I get back on the road and make my way to Shirley Creek Marina. This was where my mother and I went in the 1970s when she slipped away from work. By then, she was a successful businesswoman with her own credit cards, and she and I were the ones who strolled down to our boat—the blue and white Evinrude permanently moored at Shirley Creek. I carried my Cypress Gardens El Diablo slalom ski that flapped wildly under my arm, happy that there wasn't a tackle box in sight.

I couldn't slalom back then, but I was determined to learn. Thankfully, my friend Paula, who was renowned as one of the best skiers on Rayburn, was just as determined to teach me.

She and I jumped in the water as my mother maneuvered the boat and Paula's mother settled in as our spotter. Paula strapped on my old Mustangs so she could ski beside me as I attempted and attempted again, then failed and failed again, to slalom. But Paula and I weren't quitters. With her coaching, I learned and became almost as good of a skier as she.

Now I stand on an empty slab at Shirley Creek, my memories feeling like ashes to be scattered from their urn because this empty slab was once a restaurant with the best hamburgers around. I want to be eating dinner here with Paula and our mothers. I want to hear the sizzling of the meat on the grill and taste the juices in my mouth. I want to hear our laughter, mingling with that of the other skiers.

But just like Hanks Creek and Jackson Hill, Shirley Creek is mostly people fishing and camping. Where ski boats once parked, there are RVs and a few log cabins. I don't recall either being here when my mother allowed me to take my friends out on the boat, me walking down the gangway carrying my O'Brien ski case stuffed with my ski and gloves, my ski vest looped around my arm.

I miss the sound of the puttering engine as I backed out of our slot. I miss the smell of the water flecked with specks of tree bark. I wish I could stop longing without forgetting.

I walk down to the swim beach—it, too, didn't exist when I used to come here—and try to make new memories. I study the angle of a bass boat in the water, the tilt of fishing nets leaning against the port side. I notice a seemingly abandoned rowboat as lilies float in the water and herons glide just above its surface. The light shimmers gold on oak leaves while egrets try to hide beneath cypress. I admire the stark beauty of trees sheared bare from tornadoes. Suddenly, storm clouds move in, turning the water from blue to green and then gray. I retreat to my log cabin as I feel sprinkles on my skin, stopping only long enough to notice the RVs, some with porches and fences, many with golf carts and satellite dishes, almost all with boats. This is a community, but I don't want community.

I seek solace, and the lake-view log cabin I have rented for the night is a writer's retreat. There are a couple of chairs on a front porch, an easy chair inside, a TV that gets sporadic reception so as not to distract, a kitchenette, a clean bathroom, and a dark bedroom where I am tempted to lie down and listen to the pitter-patter of rain on the metal roof. But it's too early for sleep and the rain soon ends, so I scurry down an embankment to the lake. This is an area of Shirley Creek that I never knew existed. A tree cove to my right calls me to explore it.

In this hillside cove, I discover an opening, fenced with pine and curtained by oak heavy with moss. Mysteries permeate that moss, the bark, the pine needles,

even the weeds and dirt. Part of me wants to run from their secrets, but more of me wants to set up a wooden desk and chair, open my laptop, and listen to the stories lurking in these woods.

The sun begins to set. Clouds blow in heavy and dark. I spent so many teenage summer afternoons in Lufkin watching the clouds, wondering if they were going to build into thunderstorms that would prevent my mother from taking Paula and me skiing. But I've never seen anything like I'm watching now—a roiling sky of yellow, tangerine, peach, gold, cobalt blue, and smoke grey.

As I watch, I can see in my mind Paula and me slaloming through the cut from Shirley Creek to Hanks Creek, heading toward Jackson Hill. We're almost to Hanks when the boat stops. I raise my thumb to my mother, signaling her to shove the throttle forward. She doesn't. Paula and I begin to sink. "Go! Go!" I yell.

Swells start to swamp us. White caps wash Paula and me away from the boat. Mom tries to circle back to us. The wind pushes the boat past us. I try to swim and can't with my ski. Slowly, my mom maneuvers the boat closer to us, stretches out her arm, and pulls me in. Paula scrambles up behind me.

The unforeseen storm had blown our boat to a stop.

Another unforeseen storm blew our boat to a stop a few days after my return from Rayburn. My mother had a series of strokes. She can no longer walk. She can't feed herself. She can barely talk. But I lean down to her ear and say, "Did you like fishing at Rayburn?" She grins big and mutters, "Oh, yes. I loved it."

I feel myself finally, reluctantly, letting go of my tow rope and sinking into the water.

"But did you like taking Paula and me skiing?"

My mother smiles even bigger and says, "I loved it."

And with that I know that when she passes, I won't have to close my eyes to see her in our ski boat, reaching out, pulling me in, safe and secure.

We'll both be home. **L**

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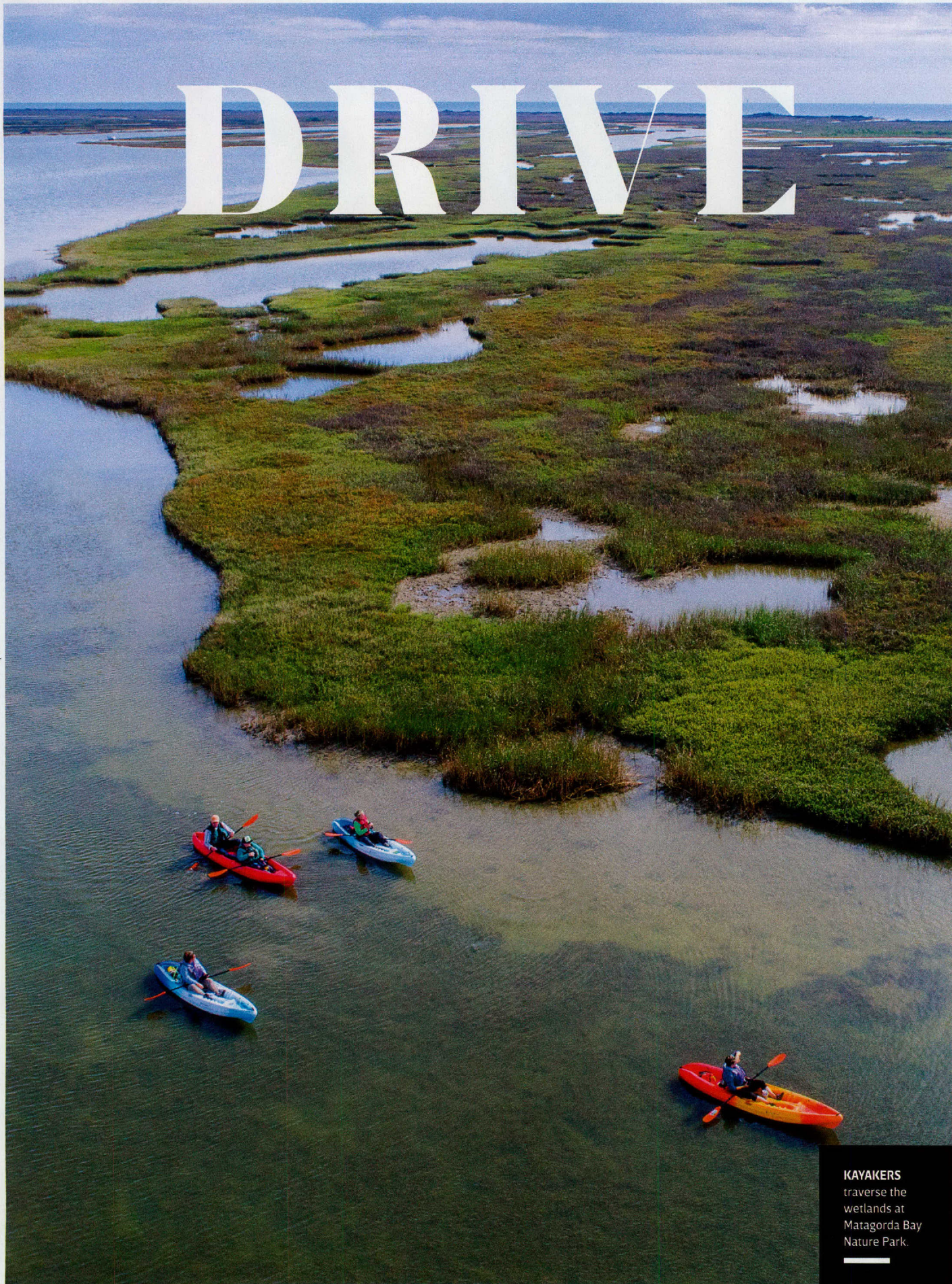
Rhyno Clayworks

POTTER RYAN LUCIER and graphic designer Melanie Pavao joined forces to form Rhyno Clayworks in Austin in 2011. Together, they update classic ceramic forms with contemporary surface treatments, sometimes glazing only part of a vessel while leaving other parts exposed. They offer an array of stoneware for home and garden, including birdhouses and planters, crocks and tumblers—and even a set of mugs printed with line-drawings of the heroes of the Texas Revolution. “I think I finally just reached a point where I knew I wanted more freedom and that I needed to be designing and creating as a full-time potter,” he says. “I was passionate about what I was doing. The rest I would figure out along the way.” *Shop more Rhyno Clayworks products at shop.texashighways.com*



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DRIVE



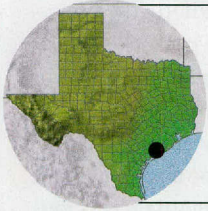
KAYAKERS
traverse the
wetlands at
Matagorda Bay
Nature Park.



Up Coast and Personal

A trip to Matagorda Bay Nature Park teaches lessons about the natural world

By Matt Joyce



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The kids were darting in and out of the surf at Matagorda Beach, filling buckets of water to pour into their sandcastle moat, when my 9-year-old daughter approached me with a thought. "I'm so glad I was made a human," she said amid the rumble of roiling waves. "Or else life would be so hard."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

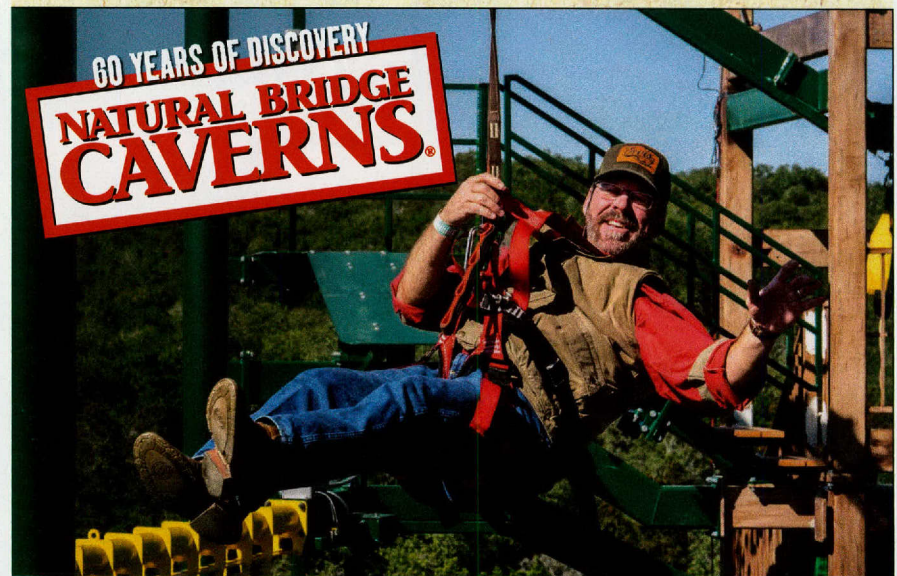
She looked at the sea gulls flapping overhead and willets hopping across the beach, their piercing eyes on the hunt for minnows, shrimp, and crabs. "All the little sea creatures have to hide in holes or they might get eaten. I'm not going to get eaten by anything."

Apparently, our visit to Matagorda Bay Nature Park had made an impression on the girl. Over two days last July, we learned about the animals and ecosystems that characterize this swirl of ocean, river, and wetlands where the Colorado River flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The Lower Colorado River Authority owns the 1,300-acre park, which offers visitors access to camping, fishing, paddling, and relaxing on an uncrowded stretch of coastline and riverbank. For kids, there's an educational nature center, a miniature golf course, and an engaging lineup of activities that illuminates the coastal environment.

For my family of four, an excursion to Matagorda Bay Nature Park meant a diversion from the midsummer doldrums—a reprieve from the temptations of screen time and air-conditioned inertia. It was also a chance to explore a part of the Texas coast with a more primitive character than well-known destinations like Galveston and Port Aransas.



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“We don’t have much commercialization, so you have a lot more nature to explore. It’s really nice for families to come visit because of how quiet it is.”

directed its establishment in 1827, and as the nearest port to New Orleans, marshy Matagorda Bay was many a pioneer’s first view of Texas. The town remains an unheralded cache of historical relics, including the 1829 Matagorda Cemetery, the 1832 Stanley-Fisher House Bed and Breakfast, and the 1838 Christ Church, which is the state’s oldest Episcopal Church.

The LCRA has worked to make Matagorda Bay Nature Park a destination in its own right. The park’s campground offers 68 grassy sites with hookups, as well as bathrooms, showers, and laundry machines. But if you don’t own a camper or don’t want to tent-camp, your best option is one of the park’s shiny Airstream trailers—two 26-foot Flying Cloud models nicknamed Ruby and Ranger. These air-conditioned marvels sleep four and include an equipped kitchen, bathroom, shower, and fridge. During downtimes, my kids busied themselves exploring Ruby’s ingenious storage nooks while my wife and I drank coffee on the front porch with views of the Colorado River and a fishing pier just yards away.

It’s a short walk from the campground to the nature center, where kids can get completely wrapped up in the hands-on exhibits. Displays like an aquarium, replica animal skulls, spotting scopes to view the landscape, and the body of a baby blacktip shark educate about local wildlife. The most popular draw is the touch tank, an aquatic exhibit where kids can handle the same live creatures found on the beach, like hermit crabs, blue crabs, and clams.

The nature center is a prelude to the

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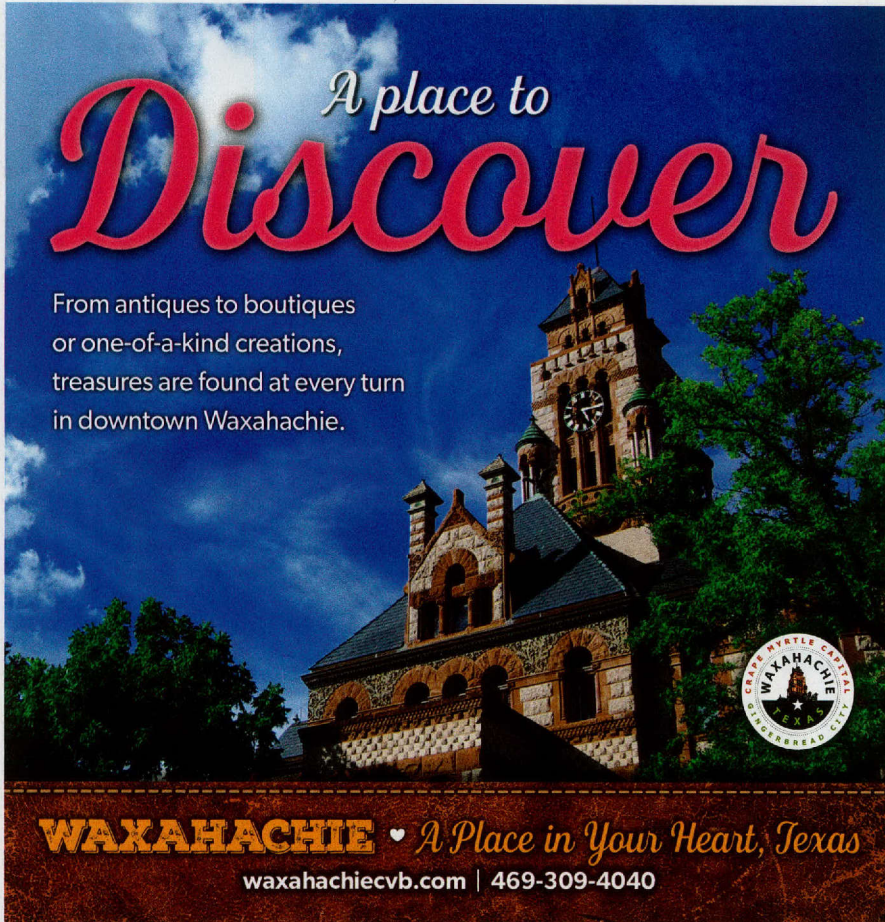


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park's organized programs. The park schedules programs for the general public on most weekends and hosts groups such as Boy Scout troops and school classes for programs throughout the year. The park canceled this year's summer camps—offered for children ages 5 to 15—because of COVID-19.

“Even people who have been down here year after year, sometimes they don't know half the stuff that's here,” Leadford said. “Our goal is to educate the public about the different animals and habitat, and to share the importance and beauty of it with everybody so they'll help us take care of it.”

During our trip, Leadford gave us a special tour to get a sense for the range of programs. On one outing, we divvied up into two-person kayaks to paddle across the mouth of the Colorado River to an undeveloped beach dotted with treasures reflecting the hidden life swirling just offshore. Among the driftwood, we found graceful, spiraling lightning whelks, the state shell of Texas; pumice from underwater volcanoes; and polished seeds, known as “sea beans,” from as far away as Brazil. Flotsam like flip-flops, fishing nets, and plastic refuse torn with the diamond-shaped bite marks of sea turtles reminded us of humanity's toll.

On another beach outing, we dug recalcitrant mole crabs and ghost shrimp from the sand; scooped minnows from the surf to examine their natural shades of camouflage; and peered into pecan-sized shells as panicked hermit crabs cowered inside. At dusk, we roasted marshmallows over a beach campfire and then used flashlights to spot ghost crabs skittering across the sand as they scavenged for clams, fish, and scraps.

“It's a survival tactic,” Leadford explained. “The crabs stay hidden in their burrows during the day to protect themselves from active predators like the birds. They've adapted to living in this environment and the obstacles they face.”

These were the challenges occupying my daughter's mind as we played on the beach before making our way home. A

steady coastal breeze whipped across the cloudless sky as my kids employed some of their newly learned biology skills, digging for crabs and protecting them by chasing off pesky sea gulls. At Matagorda Bay Nature Park, we'd discovered both a rich sanctuary for wildlife and a new perspective on survival. I smiled at my daughter's ruminations about her own humanity. What better takeaway from a family trip than a renewed appreciation for life? 🐦

Matagorda Bay Nature Park offers campsites starting at \$40 per night and two Airstreams for \$225 per night. The park also offers a nature center, visitor programs, kayak rentals, and a nine-hole mini-golf course.

BURROWING OWLS migrate to Matagorda during winter months. Some reside among the granite boulders of the jetties.



The Birthday Club

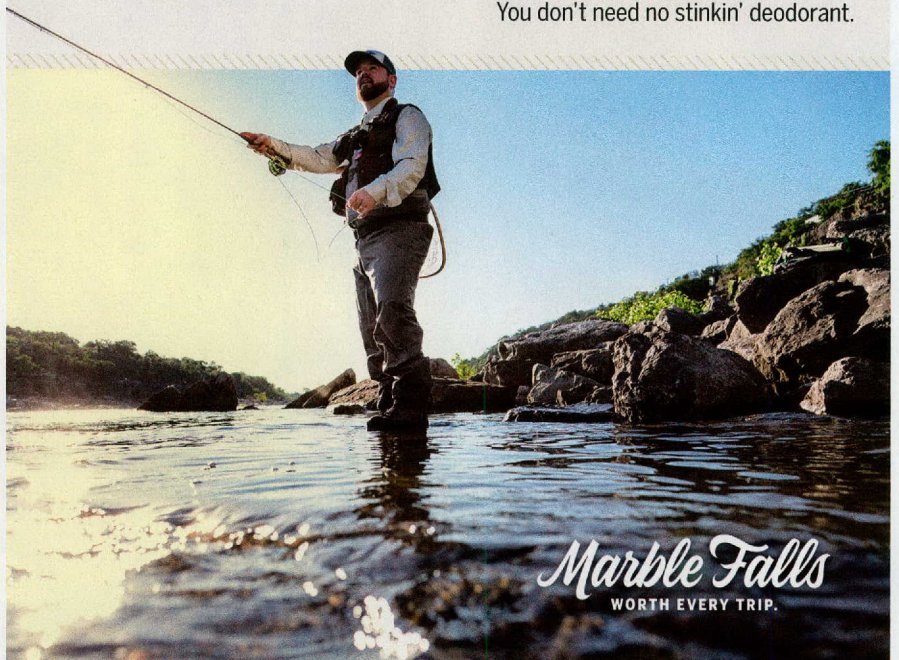
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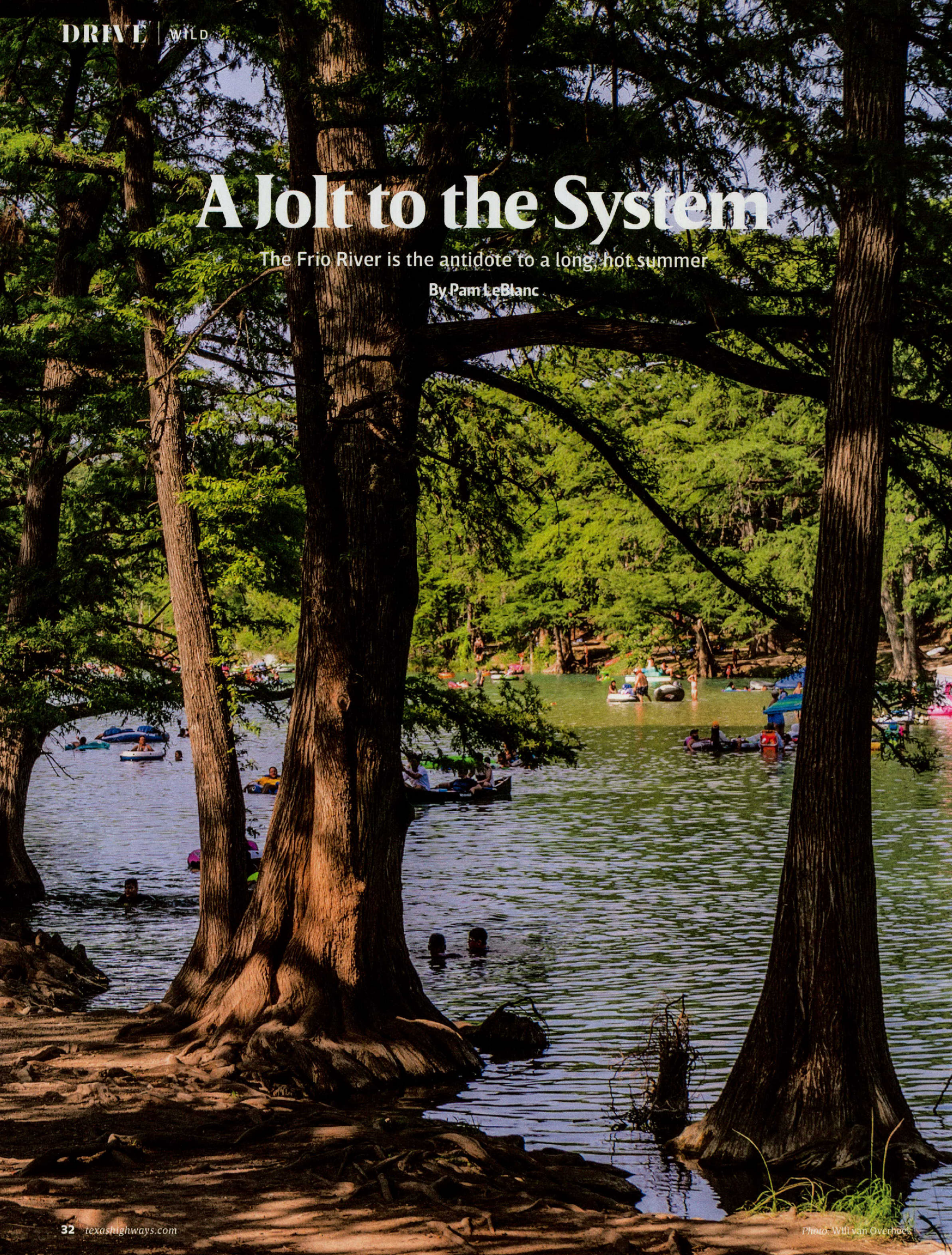
You're going to stink.
But wait, fish don't have noses.
There isn't another nose around for miles.
You don't need no stinkin' deodorant.

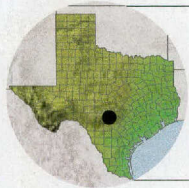


A Jolt to the System

The Frio River is the antidote to a long, hot summer

By Pam LeBlanc





FRIO RIVER
at Garner State Park,
234 RR 1050, Concan,
830-232-6132; tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/garner

Dip a toe in the blue-green swirls of the Frio River and brace for the shiver that's sure to ripple up your leg. The chilly Frio (*frío* is Spanish for "cold") snakes through the Hill Country for 200 miles, drawing tubers, paddlers, swimmers, and rope-swingers. It cuts through Garner State Park, where hikers climb the rocky trail up Old Baldy for a view usually reserved for hawks, and past the cabin-lined banks in Concan. As the river unwinds, it curls around the gnarled knees of towering bald cypress trees.

Swimming-hole connoisseurs like Heidi Armstrong, an Austin resident, flock to the Frio for relief when the heat cranks up. Armstrong booked a cabin in Concan this spring, and when she wasn't swimming, she sat on a boulder midstream and knitted.

"So much more so than other rivers, it's a huge and strong hug from nature," Armstrong says. "There are these gigantic bald cypress trees lining it, and I look at them and think, 'What do they know, what have they been through, what have they seen?' I feel like I'm swimming in a river lined with wise old souls."

Those trees lean over the swimming area at the park, watching the families who have come here for generations. Now, under COVID-19 restrictions, face coverings are strongly encouraged. Also, no groups of more than five people are allowed, except for families or people living in the same household, with the 6-foot rule to be applied to people outside of your group. (See TPWD's website above for complete and up-to-date restrictions.)

The Frio is a cold compress that heals the burn of a scalding day. All along the waterway, lime-colored leaves filter the light, boulders warm their shoulders in the sunshine, and the deep green pools beckon. The cold might come as a jolt, but you'll feel revitalized from the plunge. 🐬



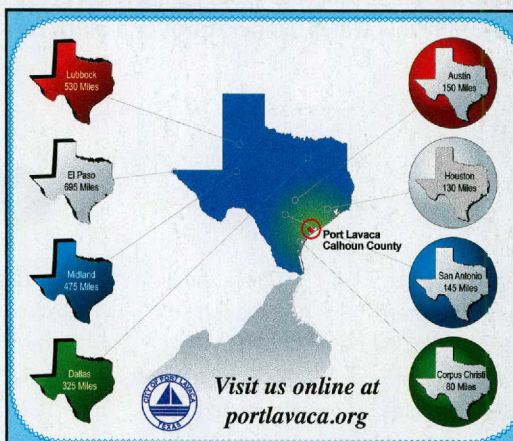
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Forever Cool in a Spring-Fed Pool

Freshwater swimming spots for the win this summer

By Michael Hoinski and Julia Jones



Balmorhea Springs Forth

The Civilian Conservation Corps, a public work relief program started by Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression, built state and national parks across Texas. This includes Balmorhea State Park and its iconic West Texas spring-fed swimming pool, which was crafted in the 1930s. Recently, it's had some major structural difficulties. The wall where the diving board is located crumbled in 2018, forcing the park to shutter for repairs. After reopening in 2019, there were several hiccups with the septic system, forcing the park to shut down again. If everything goes according to plan, you'll be able to visit in late summer and experience the CCC's craftsmanship firsthand.

If the idea of hitting a crowded neighborhood swimming pool has you uneasy this summer, consider taking a dip in one of Texas' many spring-fed swimming holes. There's generally more space to spread out, the natural environment makes for a prettier backdrop, and the non-chlorinated water is easier on the skin. It's a luxury afforded to those of us lucky enough to live in Texas, which has more spring-fed swimming spots than any other state in the U.S.

There are "pools" with concrete embankments, like at Barton Springs in Austin, Landa Park in New Braunfels, and San Pedro Springs Park in San Antonio. There are also natural bodies of water, like Jacob's Well and Hamilton Pool in Wimberley and Dripping Springs, respectively. In total, these freshwater oases, sourced by more than 3,000 springs, share consistently low water temperatures that allow for a major cooldown in the summer heat.

TAKE FLIGHT

Plunging into a body of water from a swinging rope is a rite of passage for swimming-hole enthusiasts, but before you do, consider these safety tips. -Pam LeBlanc

1

Test the water. Make sure there aren't any rocks, branches, or other obstacles.

2

Check the branch holding the rope. Is it strong enough to hold you?

3

Untangle the rope from your body for an easy dismount.

4

Don't release too soon, or too late. Slamming into a tree trunk is no fun.

5

Don't drink and swing, and don't swing if you can't swim.

69°F

Average temperature at **Barton Springs Pool**

1935

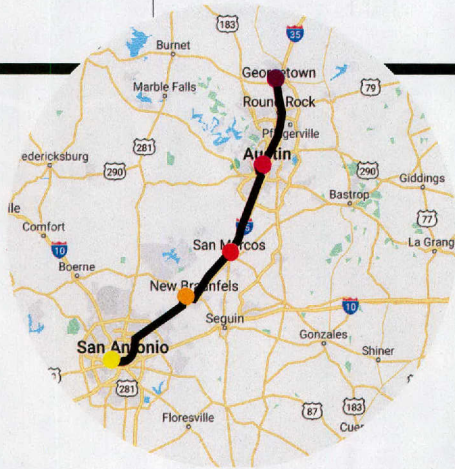
Year construction on **Balmerhea State Park** began

140

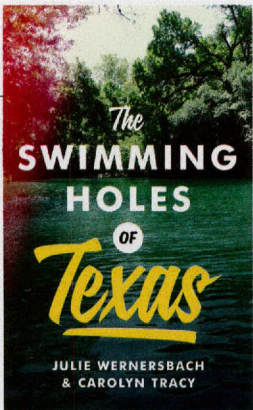
Depth (in feet) of the cavern system at **Jacob's Well**

Swimming 6-Pack

For the “Back to Your Routes” feature in the May 2020 issue of *Texas Highways*, writer-at-large Joe Nick Patoski combined two of his loves—spring-fed freshwater swimming and road trips—into a single adventure. His proposed “Swimming-Hole Trail” breaks down the 130-mile drive between Georgetown and San Antonio into a one-day (two, if you’re casual about it) excursion that includes six swimming spots for a refreshing summer retreat.



- **Georgetown:** Blue Hole Park
- **Austin:** Barton Springs Pool
- **San Marcos:** San Marcos Springs
- **San Marcos:** Rio Vista Park
- **New Braunfels:** Landa Park
- **San Antonio:** San Pedro Springs Park



Carolyn: The Schumacher Crossing. It’s literally just a river crossing and an old bridge out near Hunt. When we did the updates for the second edition, we went back there to make sure we had the details right. We had such a great swim there, and it’s sort of off the beaten path.

What are some tips for enjoying these types of places?

Julie: Every step you take has an ecological impact. Keep in mind that you’re visiting a natural spot and it’s beautiful, and we want to keep it beautiful. We have these places only if we protect these places.

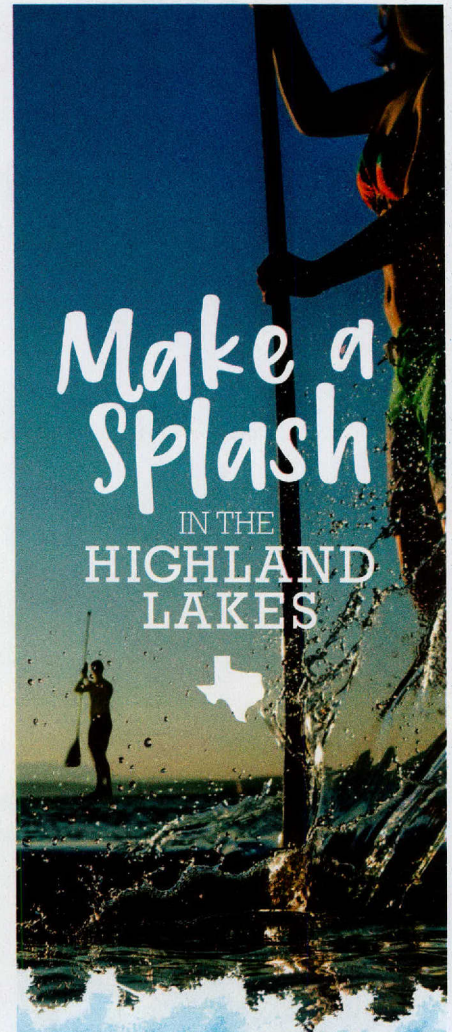
Watering Hole Experts

Julie Wernersbach and Carolyn Tracy, who co-authored *The Swimming Holes of Texas*, visited well over 100 locations in a single summer to write their book. “We’d just look at maps and follow the water,” Julie says.

What are your favorite swimming holes?

Julie: James Kiehl River Bend Park in Comfort. Real pretty little spot. It’s very quiet. It’s small but not typically too crowded, and there’s lots of shade and beautiful trees.

Carolyn: Living in a remote place, you see the way that the land bounces back when the tourists go away, and you see what happens when they arrive again. Be really mindful about your impact.



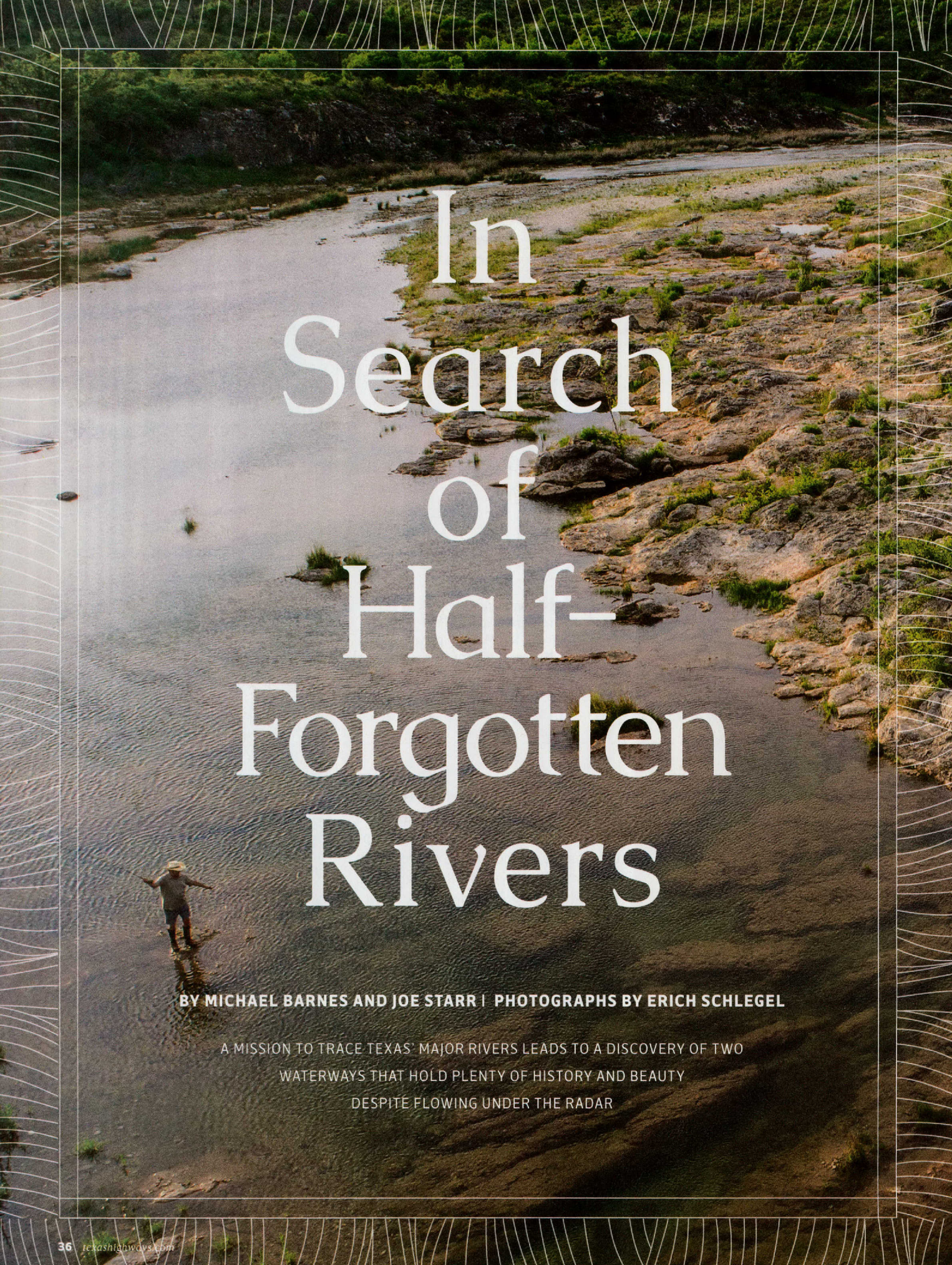
- LAKE BUCHANAN
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- LAKE LBJ
- LAKE MARBLE FALLS
- LAKE TRAVIS



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In Search of Half- Forgotten Rivers

BY MICHAEL BARNES AND JOE STARR | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICH SCHLEGEL

A MISSION TO TRACE TEXAS' MAJOR RIVERS LEADS TO A DISCOVERY OF TWO
WATERWAYS THAT HOLD PLENTY OF HISTORY AND BEAUTY
DESPITE FLOWING UNDER THE RADAR



Tim Osburn
fly-fishes on the
James River
in Mason.

After gushing up from cold springs,

the James River's crystal-clear waters wind through a narrow, verdant canyon before joining the Llano River at a shoal of smooth stones just south of Mason. Farther north, the Pease River runs in ribbons from the caprock through grass-tufted mesas and across pebbled limestone beds. Near its mouth at the Red River in Vernon, it bends around muddy pastures covered with tall grasses and big trees.

The James and the Pease, no matter how lovely, remain largely unvisited. There are few points of entry, making them difficult to access. During trips in 2016 and 2019, we—Michael Barnes, a longtime columnist for the *Austin American-Statesman*, and Joe Starr, an English as a Second Language professor at Houston Community College—hardly saw anyone on their banks. In fact, when we started tracing Texas rivers a decade ago, we had never even heard of the James or the Pease.

The two of us came up with a term for these rivers: half-forgotten. Few seem to know of their existence, and those who do don't visit them often. So they sit isolated, hidden, and relatively untouched by human interaction. In seeking out the James and Pease rivers over the course of 10 years, we came to learn a lot about their distinct characteristics.

We got to know each other in college 45 years ago and have been road trip buddies ever since. By the early 2000s, we had traveled across almost the entire Lower 48 by car, van, and truck, visiting parks, monuments, museums, and whatever else the road happened to throw our way. Our shared urge to trace Texas rivers started out as a hankering for space. As Texans living in urban areas, we longed for a stretch of road with no cars in sight. In 2003, we decided to track the route of the Lewis and Clark expedition from Camp Dubois in Hartford, Illinois, all the way to Fort Clatsop, Oregon. Like the early explorers, we followed the rivers.

A few years after that, standing on Bryan Beach at the mouth of the Brazos River near Freeport, it hit us: What if we traced every major river in Texas?

We read a couple dozen books about those rivers, then crisscrossed the countryside. We documented our hikes to the rivers, visited scores of parks, sampled hundreds of local eateries, photographed a great many courthouses, and stopped at just about every historical marker along the way. We blogged about our adventures for the *Austin American-Statesman*.

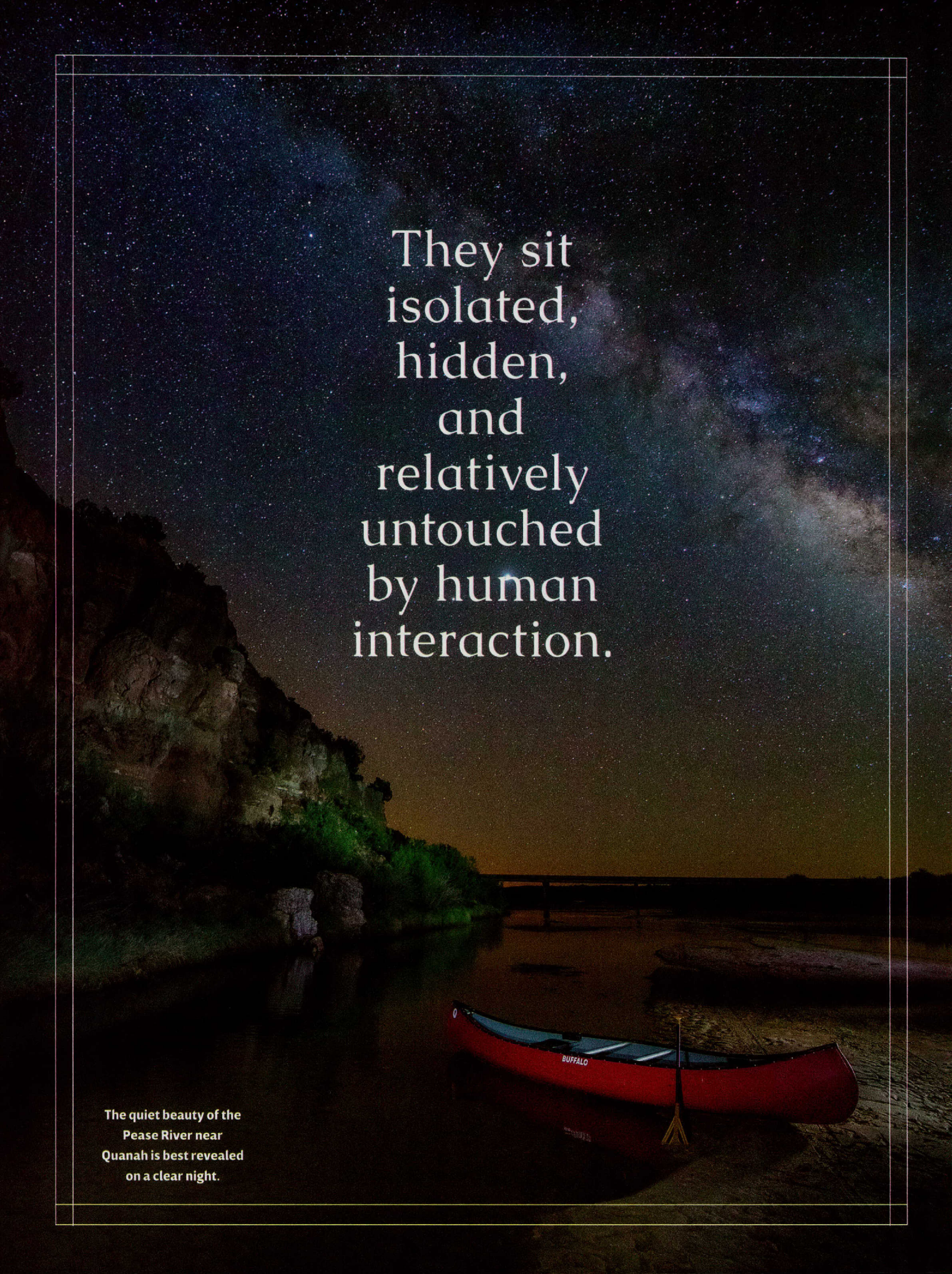
We were careful not to trespass on private property and stuck to riverbeds, which are fair game according to navigation rights published by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. We started out with paper maps, including some that were very detailed—and at the time, expensive—published by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Through the 50 river-tracing road trips that took us down from the mountains, through the deserts and hills, across the prairies and forests, and, in some cases, right down to the Gulf shore, we got to know Texas a little better. Even though it sometimes feels like we've barely scratched the surface of this state, seeking out new-to-us corners of natural beauty with tangible connections of past to present endeared us even more to the place we call home.





Underwater view
of the springs
along the James
River in Mason.

A red canoe is positioned on a calm river at night. The sky is filled with stars, and the Milky Way galaxy is visible, arching across the upper right portion of the frame. The river reflects the light from the stars and the canoe. In the background, a bridge is visible on the horizon. The overall scene is serene and quiet.

They sit
isolated,
hidden,
and
relatively
untouched
by human
interaction.

The quiet beauty of the
Pease River near
Quanah is best revealed
on a clear night.



THE JAMES

Called “The Unknown River of Central Texas” by nonprofit advocacy group the Environmental Defense Fund, the James is the only major tributary of the Llano if you don’t count the North Llano and the South Llano. The latter join neatly in the aptly named town of Junction. The James, meanwhile, begins in Kimble County and continues northeast to meet the Llano near Mason.

The James-Llano system suffered major floods in June 1935, September 1980, and October 2018. Perhaps that’s why there are so few structures or mature trees along the river or James River Road, which follows the low canyon for much of its length.

In 2019, on our second visit, we started at the true headwaters of the James, located on private land. There, Russell Rogas looked out over the low, smooth, tilted canyon. “After the big floods, just about everything you see had changed,” said Russell, a Brenham resident whose family owns the land surrounding the headwaters in Kimble County. “That boulder was over here. This pond was over there.”

His father-in-law, Larry Tegeler, purchased the terraced valley on Ranch Road 479 between Harper and Junction “for the view and the water,” which are ardently enjoyed by Russell, his wife, Amey Rogas, and their four outdoorsy sons. The Rogas family has survived epic floods, wildfires, and, three years ago, a tornado that somehow did not damage what remains of the Creed Taylor Ranch Home. A historical marker notes it was once dubbed “the finest home west of San Antonio.” It burned down in 1926 and again in 1956. A single-story house now sits on the 19th-century foundation.

“We just come and relax,” Russell said. “In this world where everything goes on, this is a nice respite for the boys.” His sons—Britt, 18, twins Ben and Grant, 16, and Jack, 11—are all over these highlands in ATVs, Russell said. That morning, Jack had killed a hog, and the boys estimate they shoot 15

feral hogs a month on the land during the summer. They invited us to sift through the remains of a Native American midden littered with chert that rises slightly above the clear, cold first waters of the James.

“There are springs all through here,” Amey said. “In the summer, you can hear it. It sounds like a bathtub with the faucet on full.”

Below this spot, the casual visitor comes in direct contact with the James and its shorter tributary, the Little Devils River, at only a few spots along RR 479 and RR 385. Travelers can also see the James by taking the granite-gravel James River Road, which shadows the lower James until it converges with the Llano River near RR 2389 in Mason County. Yet there are plenty of sights along the way, including an especially helpful historical marker that explains how a Spanish expedition in 1808 forged through these canyons on the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

We stopped in the dry bed as the river road crossed recharge zones. There, we marveled at the stratified rock canyon walls and the pools of water teeming with tiny sunfish and Guadalupe bass. The anglers’ paradise would not have gone unnoticed by practiced fishermen, such as revered authors Fred Gipson and John Graves, who wrote poignantly about the James.

John Karges, an affable and well-informed conservation biologist with The Nature Conservancy of Texas, met us the next morning at a tiny roadside park at the intersection of US 87 and RR 1723, just south of Mason. After exchanging enthusiasms about the James River, we followed Karges to RR 2389. Our destination was the Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve, owned and operated by the Nature Conservancy. One of the few public amenities on this stretch of river is the Dos Rios RV Park, which perches on a bluff above this confluence, serving as a base for fishing, swimming, and kayaking. From there, our journey took us up the James River Road, where Karges stopped to show us a natural grotto and a smooth-edge bedrock canyon above the James.

“This really reminds me more of the geology of West Texas,” he said.

Under Karges’ direction, we crossed the wide ford that had held us up the previous day. A few yards away is the well-marked, gated entrance to the 8-acre preserve named after Phillip Eckert, a rancher who made the first recorded discovery of the cave in 1907. His grandson, Clinton Schulze, and his wife, Anne Schulze, are credited with assuring the land’s conservation and shaping the interpretative trail that leads to the cave’s mouth. During the summer months, the conservancy offers scheduled weekend tours for as many as 100 people at a time to two viewing spots outside the cave. The water-carved cavern is home to 4 million bats of two varieties, Mexican free-tailed and cave myotis, which live in separate colonies inside the cave and emerge in pulses containing an estimated 100,000 flying mammals at a time. Predators lie in wait at the entrance, but since the bat population is in the millions, the numbers are on the bats’ side.

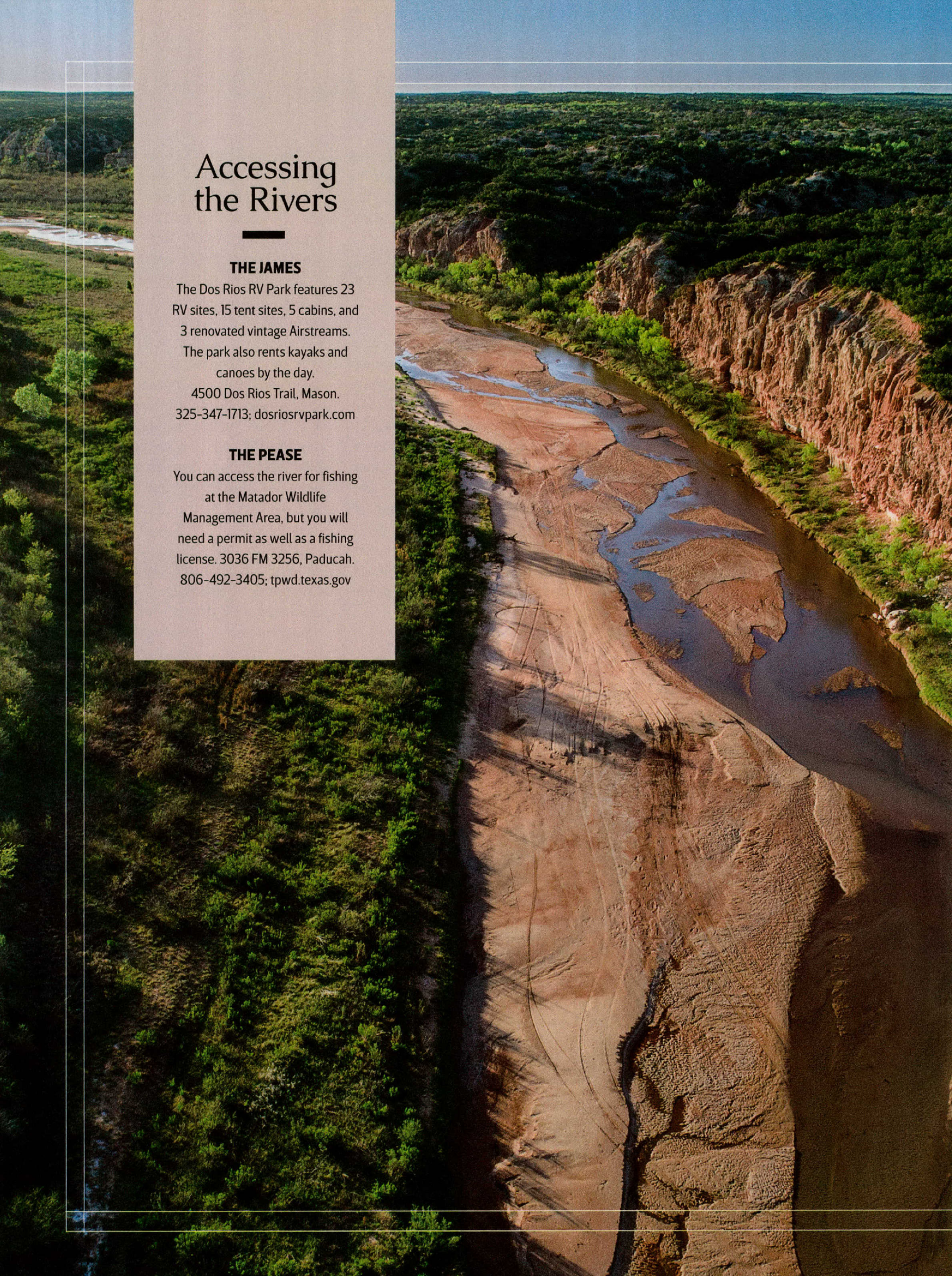
“They make vortex spirals as they emerge,” Karges said. “And now we know that there are exchanges among the Central Texas bat colonies. They are hard to monitor, but we are learning more all the time.”



THE PEASE

The Pease begins northeast of the small town of Paducah. It continues to where it disgorges into the Red River after flowing through rugged ranchland near the town of Vernon. It also passes by the city of Quanah, which we wanted to explore for its associations with the last Comanche chief, Quanah Parker, and his mother, the twice-kidnapped Cynthia Ann Parker. After Quanah, the Pease curves northward toward Vernon and its terminus at the Red River.

The Pease River awaits visitors along the stony banks at two handsome plots of public land, the Matador Wildlife Management Area and Copper Breaks State Park. We encountered the North, Middle,



Accessing the Rivers

THE JAMES

The Dos Rios RV Park features 23 RV sites, 15 tent sites, 5 cabins, and 3 renovated vintage Airstreams.

The park also rents kayaks and canoes by the day.

4500 Dos Rios Trail, Mason.
325-347-1713; dosriosrvpark.com

THE PEASE

You can access the river for fishing at the Matador Wildlife

Management Area, but you will need a permit as well as a fishing license. 3036 FM 3256, Paducah.
806-492-3405; tpwd.texas.gov



The Pease River runs beneath a bridge on County Road 104 near Quanah.

and South Pease rivers up and down county roads off US 62 between Childress and Paducah. Two of the three forks of the Pease are accessible for tourists at the Matador Wildlife Management Area, which contains 28,000 acres of rolling high-grass prairie dotted with mesquite, juniper, and shinnery oaks.

“Quail season is our busiest time of year,” said Chip Ruthven, manager of the wildlife area. “If it’s a good quail season.”

Northeast of Paducah, the full Pease is crossed by one of our favorite river vantage points in Texas: a relatively new bridge on Cottle County Road 104. Here, one can easily park on the north side of the bridge and walk down to wide sandbars, braided streamlets, and high white bluffs pocked with overhangs and caves. So half-forgotten is the Pease that if you browse online for images of it, among the top returns are photographs we took on our two trips.

At Copper Breaks State Park, a few miles south of Quanah, park interpreter Will Speer answered our questions while we toured the museum at the headquarters.

The name of the park comes from rocks containing copper mineral that cover the land. “But none of it was worth anything,” Speer said. “Little chunks of copper buried in clay. Basically, it could not be smelted.” The broken topography explains the latter half of the name. “The sandstone and mudstone from the San Angelo formation and the Permian bedrock are quite rugged above the creek,” Speer added.

The Comanche gathered in the area because of the spring-fed Big Pond and the four conical Medicine Mounds, which they believed held spiritual powers. The mounds rise 200 to 350 feet above the plains. “This area was one of their strongholds, revered as sacred or ceremonial grounds,” Speer explained.

Despite all of this, the Pease remains unloved, in part because the amount of gypsum that naturally shows up in the water makes it unpleasant to drink.

This information dovetailed with what we had learned earlier in the day from Shane Lance, who showed us around the Quanah, Acme & Pacific Railway Depot Museum. The town of Quanah, backed financially in part by Quanah Parker, was built on the fortunes of railroads and a giant nearby gypsum mine and plant. Acme, the plant’s company town, was promoted by Harry Koch, the grandfather of the billionaire Koch brothers.

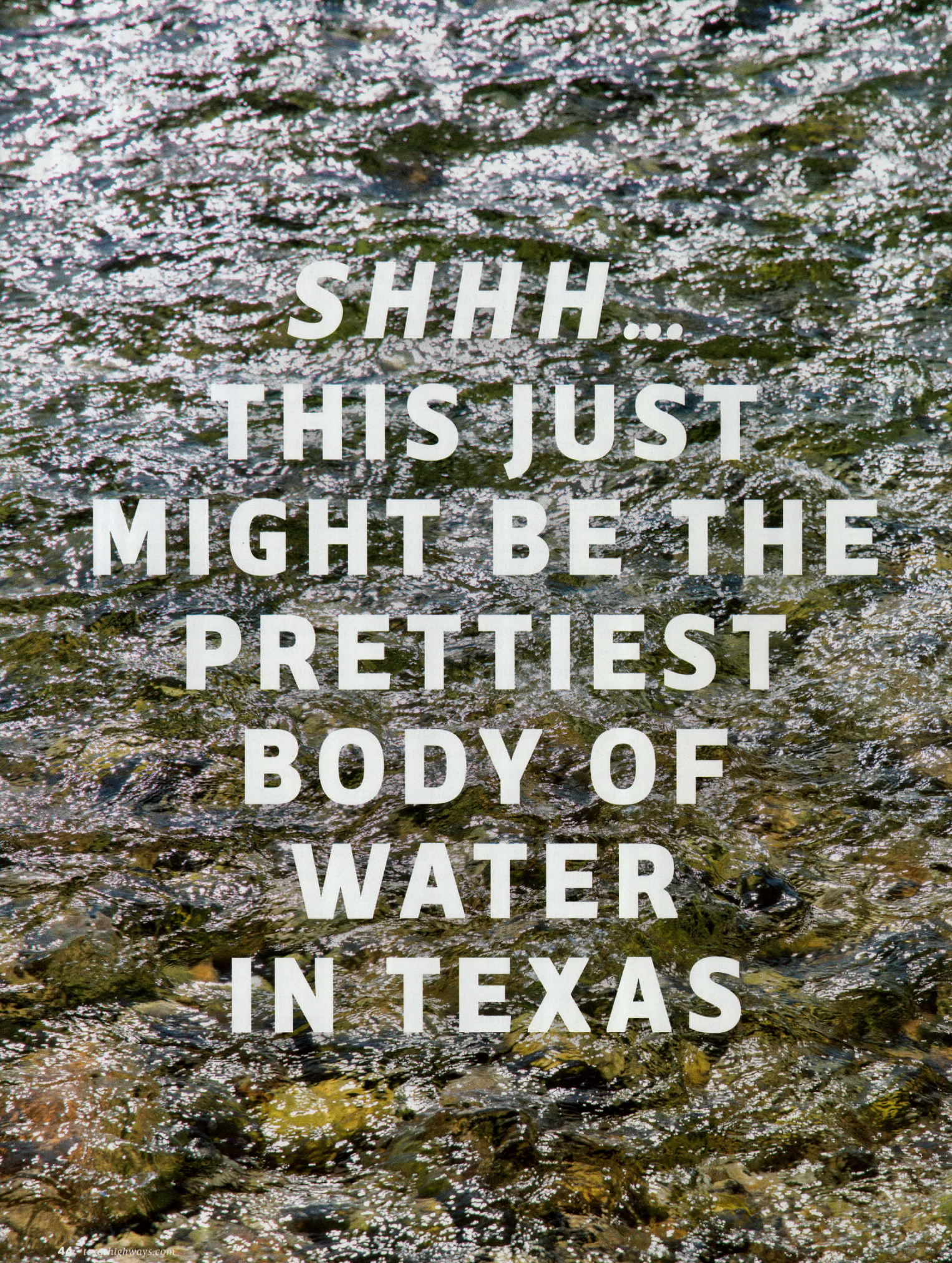
Despite its relative solitude, the Pease is perhaps best known for an 1860 battle that was part of the frontier’s Indian Wars.

“It wasn’t a battle, actually,” Speer corrected. “It was a massacre of 15 or so women and one brave down in Foard County. They were camped on the south side of the river and were surprised by Sul Ross and his Rangers, who killed everybody except Cynthia Ann Parker because her hair was light and her eyes blue.”


The state’s most famous kidnapping victim and Quanah Parker’s mother, Cynthia Ann was taken by the Comanches in 1836 in what is now Limestone County, and then retaken by Texas Rangers on the Pease River in 1860. She had become the beloved wife of Chief Peta Nacona and mother of their three children, including Quanah. Her later life among the Texans was miserable; most of all she missed her sons. Several times she tried to escape, according to *A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captivities in the West, 1830–1885* by Gregory and Susan Michno. Speer told us about a marker near CR 3103 on the way to Margaret that commemorated where Cynthia Ann was recaptured.

Cynthia Ann’s story stayed with us as we drove up and down the narrow county roads. Yet, as hard as we tried, we could not find the marker or the battlefield.

But disappointments and dead ends, as well as delights and discoveries, are part of the fun of tracing Texas rivers. There is a certain pleasure in being thrown off balance—learning from what we sought but could not find, and getting lost in parts of Texas we did not recognize. **L**



SHHH...
**THIS JUST
MIGHT BE THE
PRETTIEST
BODY OF
WATER
IN TEXAS**



THE
KING
OF TEXAS
SWIMMING
HOLES
DISCOVERS
THE
HIDDEN
WONDERS
OF THE
NUECES
RIVER

BY
JOE NICK
PATOSKI

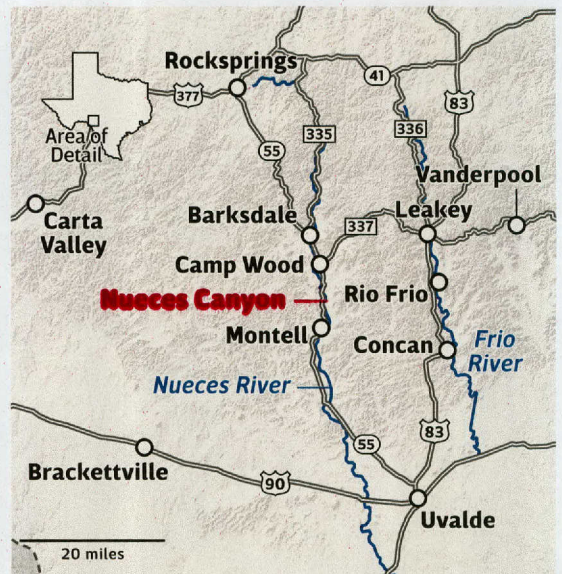
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY KENNY
BRAUN

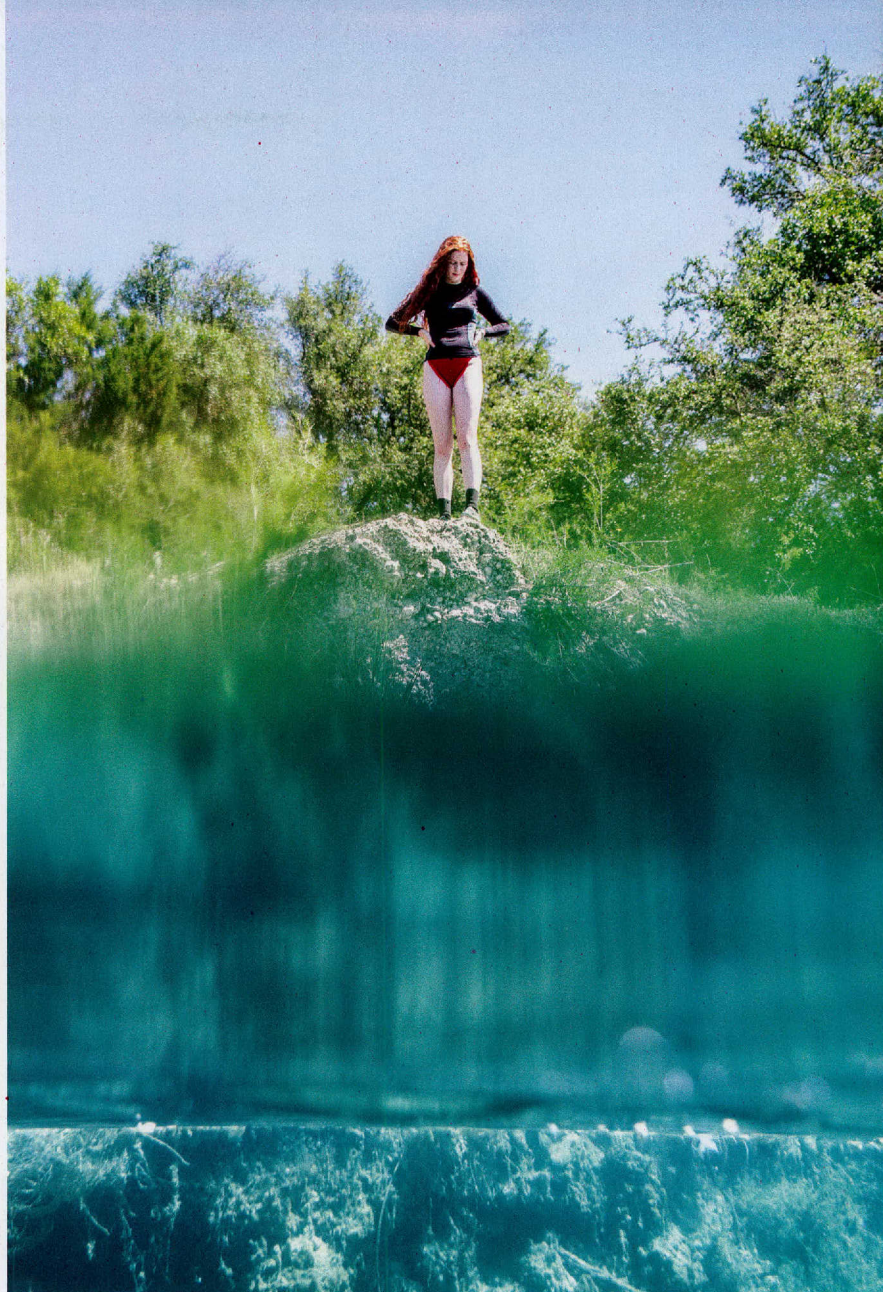


LAST SUMMER, I DROVE INTO THE NUECES CANYON FROM LEAKEY ON RANCH ROAD 337,

one of the storied Twisted Sisters drives favored by weekend motorcyclists. I was looking for what I suspected was one of the most pristine bodies of water in Texas, a Hill Country river hardly anyone ever talks about.

I arrived in Camp Wood, population 736, a century-old town originally known as a hub for raising sheep and goats. Most of the storefronts along State Highway 55—the main drag dually known as Nueces Street—were occupied, but this did not feel like the Hill Country most tourists experience. None of the businesses were gussied up, and there wasn't a winery or distillery for miles. The newest structure was a Family Dollar. The shuttered two-story hotel, the faded sign identifying the mohair business, the empty Lindbergh Park, and the mysterious point of interest with seven flagpoles on SH 55 just north of town serve as testaments to events that transpired here on the western edge of the Hill Country over the past 250 years or so.





These spots exist expressly because of the Nueces River and its adjoining creeks, springs, and tributaries. The river is why people settled in the remote Nueces Canyon and why they remain. It's also why a growing number of intrepid travelers are passing on popular Hill Country destinations to play in Camp Wood, as well as Barksdale, Montell, and points in between.

I'm a spring-fed freshwater swimming nut. Rivers and creeks are my thing, as long as they're unspoiled, untamed, and unchlorinated—the clearer, the better. The sweetest water I've ever seen was on a ranch near the headwaters of the West Fork of the Nueces, out in the middle of nowhere. The water, fresh and infused with ozone, even smelled amazing, like

a crashing wave at the beach, minus the salt. I wanted to know if the main channel of the Nueces River, about 20 miles south of its headwaters, was as clear, clean, and dreamy to swim in as the neighboring Frio and Devils rivers.

My guide was Jim Holder, a chirpy, suspenders-wearing board member for the local volunteer group installing exhibits and signage for Mission San Lorenzo de La Santa Cruz, a public archeological site near the banks of the Nueces. Holder is a retired school teacher and businessman whose kinfolk go back to the 1880s around these parts. He attended elementary school here before moving away and returned as a retiree eight years ago. Holder enjoys life in Camp Wood.

OPENING SPREAD: The Nueces is considered the last of the pristine rivers in Texas. **FROM LEFT:** Ranch Road 337 leads to Camp Wood; Sweeping vistas of Nueces Canyon abound along RR 337; a swimming hole south of Camp Wood off Riverview Road.



“The smaller the town, the more people want to visit,” he noted, as we headed north of town to Camp Wood Springs, aka Old Faithful Springs, a couple hundred yards from the river. “Until two years ago, this was the sole source of drinking water for the town,” Holder said of the gin-clear water in the small pond.

Holder guided me to Barksdale, four miles north of Camp Wood, to look at more springs. We took Ray McDonald Ranch Road off SH 55 past a low-water bridge and across a field of white rubble deposited by the October 2018 floods. The actual river was a thin channel maybe 20 feet wide in the rubble, wedged against a low limestone shelf. As the westernmost Hill Country river, constantly rechanneled by big floods that periodically tear through the basin, the Nueces’ riparian landscape is minimalist: white rocks of all sizes, with occasional stands of hackberry, sycamore, oak, and pecan. It reminded me of the Greek islands.

Holder told me this was one of his favorite places on the river to visit. We parked

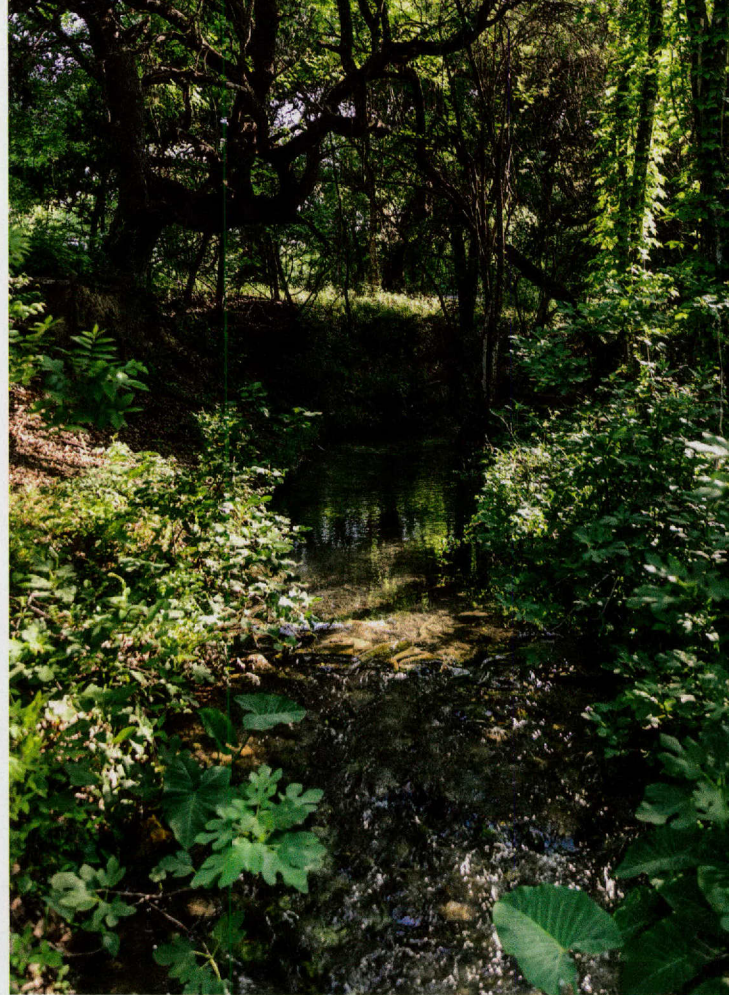
THE WATER WAS BRISK FOR A TEXAS RIVER IN AUGUST, AND PRACTICALLY SEE-THROUGH WITH ALMOST UNLIMITED VISIBILITY. IF I LIVED HERE, I’D SWIM LAPS EVERY DAY I COULD, I THOUGHT, AS I CHUGGED DOWN AND UP THE NARROW CHANNEL. THE WATER WAS THAT CLOSE TO PERFECTION.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Chilling in The Quince; Jim Holder knows the ways of the Nueces; Old Faithful Springs feeds the Nueces and nurtures riparian habitat; Two Fat Boys BBQ on State Highway 55.

and I had a swim. The water was brisk for a Texas river in August and practically see-through with almost unlimited visibility. A few small bass and cichlids congregated around rare patches of vegetation.

If I lived here, I’d swim laps every day I could, I thought, as I chugged down and up the narrow channel. The water was that close to perfection. While I swam, Holder read Paul Horgan’s book *Great River*, about the Rio Grande. “I can spend two hours here every day, easy,” he said.

Compared to Hill Country rivers to the



east, the Nueces is relatively unpeopled. The dearth of attractions beyond the water is no liability; it's an asset.

The next stop was the former site of Mission San Lorenzo de La Santa Cruz, just north of the Camp Wood town limits on the west side of SH 55. Situated on a small ridge above the east bank of the Nueces River, the empty but overgrown grounds sandwiched between two rural residences would have been easy to miss if not for seven flagpoles by the highway. "Those are the six flags over Texas," Holder said. "Plus, the Lipan Apache had their own flag."

The site was originally excavated in 1962 by Curtis Tunnell and a Texas Memorial Museum field crew from the University of Texas at Austin. Over the past two summers, it has been reexamined by Tamra Walter of Texas Tech University along with the Texas Archeological Society, which had 300 volunteers camping near the location while doing excavation work. Interpretive signage will be installed, Holder promised, as a manner of explaining the site's deep connection to the river.

Back in Camp Wood, we turned west and followed a dirt road maybe a half-mile to The Quince. This is the town's sparkling swimming hole, hollowed from a bed of gravel by the sycamore-shaded banks of the Nueces and named for its 15-foot depth. Heading south on SH 55, we hit water crossings for the next 19 miles. On the dirt path of County Road 416 South, the southern extension of Wes Cooksey Park Road, Holder suddenly cautioned, "Slow down, slow down. STOP!"

The road abruptly ended. A 50-foot-long low-water bridge, built five years ago, had both ends washed out by the October 2018 deluge. The route was impassable. The washed-out bridge is now a choice slab for river swimming.

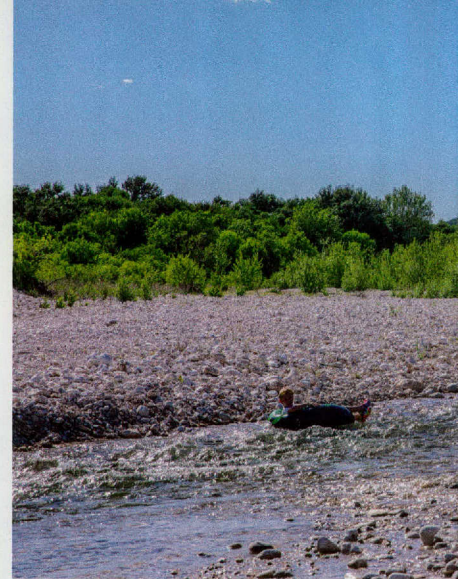
Nine miles south of Camp Wood, we stopped at a clearing on the east side of the highway with four historical markers, three of them faded and tilted. The markers identified the second Spanish mission in Nueces Canyon, Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria del Cañón. Unlike Mission San Lorenzo, Señora de la Candelaria completely disappeared as

the adobe eroded into the terrain.

Holder turned around and pointed across the highway. "That's Montell," he said.

Back when I conjured my first "Top Ten Swimming Holes in Texas" list, for the June 1985 issue of *Texas Monthly*, I had one major omission. Liz Rogers, then a hard-charging attorney in El Paso, told me I should have written about her family place on a creek that fed the Nueces in her hometown of Montell. It was the best swimming hole anywhere, she contended. I couldn't include Montell, I told her, since it was on private property. More than 40 years later, making my way downriver from swimming hole to swimming hole, I appreciated Rogers' passion for the water.

The heart of the settlement of Montell is a stout, rectangular old stucco building identified as the Montell Country Club. Built as a one-room schoolhouse in the early 1920s, the building was converted into a community center after the school closed. "That country club is the reason I had no idea that country clubs usually connote wealth," Rogers told me. "The canyon



can be insular,” she allowed. “But it was a beautiful place to grow up. We were surrounded by people that pushed us and cared about us.”

Holder and I drove 9 miles south to Nineteen Mile Crossing, where Nueces Canyon flattens. We then looped back to Camp Wood and Leon Klink Street, just west of Nueces Street. Leon Klink Street was named for the pilot and airplane owner who flew with 22-year-old Charles Lindbergh when their Canuck biplane accidentally landed in a field north of Camp Wood in 1924.

“This was where the plane landed, crashed, and took off,” Holder explained while slow-cruising Leon Klink Street. He pointed out the vacant site of Warren Puett’s hardware store, which the biplane crashed into while attempting takeoff. Lindbergh and Klink were forced to stick

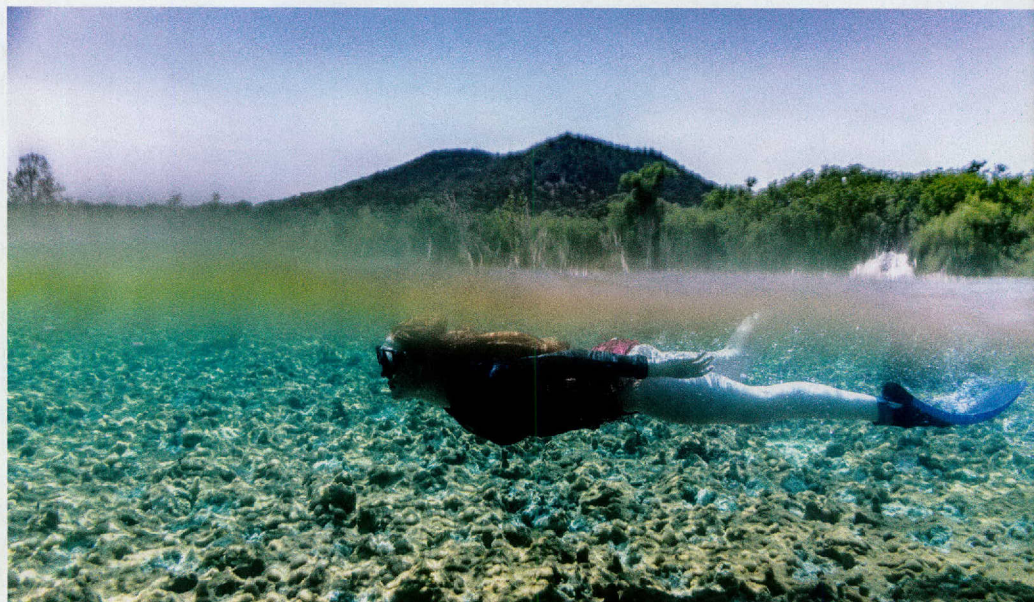
around and wait for a propeller replacement and materials for wing repair. “That was the two-story Fitzgerald Hotel where Klink and Lindbergh stayed,” Holder said, pointing to a one-story, blue-green house behind a white picket fence. Three years after the Camp Wood ordeal, Lindbergh became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

The past in Nueces Canyon remains shrouded in a tangle of overgrowth and mystery. But I didn’t spend too much time wondering about it. There was more swimming to do.

THE NAMING OF RIVERS, along with mountains, valleys, and other natural landmarks, is often a perk reserved for their conquerors. That’s why you never

hear about the Chotilapacquen, as the Nueces was known to the Coahuiltecan-speaking locals. They were defeated by the Spanish, whose name prevailed.

The Spanish explorer Alonso de León named it “Nueces” for the abundant pecan groves he observed along the river’s banks. Other Spanish explorers mapped the river upstream from Corpus Christi Bay across the Brush Country of South Texas to the westernmost canyon of the Hill Country and its headwaters, 2,400 feet above sea level and 315 miles away. Along the journey upstream, the river disappeared for stretches. Around present-day Uvalde, the water was startlingly clear and surprisingly abundant. Upstream, the river frequently vanished under piles of gravel and rocks, again and again, only to reappear a few hundred yards later.



The early Spanish explorers chose a location 30 miles downstream from the headwaters, just downstream from Camp Wood Springs, which provided a constant source of water. There, in January 1762, Mission San Lorenzo de la Santa Cruz was founded by a Spanish commander with the help of a Franciscan missionary. The mission aimed to spread Christianity while offering shelter and protection to the Lipan Apache, who were being harassed by Comanche and other hostile tribes. The establishment of the mission—at least 14 adobe and limestone structures—came four years after Mission Santa Cruz de San Sabá near present-day San Saba was destroyed by the Comanche. The Comanche were angered by the alliance the Lipan Apache, their enemy, made with the Spanish.

THE PAST IN NUECES CANYON REMAINS SHROUDED IN A TANGLE OF OVERGROWTH AND MYSTERY. BUT I DIDN'T SPEND TOO MUCH TIME WONDERING ABOUT IT. THERE WAS MORE SWIMMING TO DO.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jumping from a cliff into Lake Nueces; lounging in the shallows; the river as it emerges out of the hills; snorkeling in glassy water; upstream view from the Camp Wood Hills low-water bridge.

Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria del Cañón, a companion mission 10 miles south, was established two weeks after San Lorenzo. Within seven years, both were abandoned. Two smallpox epidemics, Comanche attacks, and the realization that the Lipan Apache weren't interested in converting to Christianity prompted the retreat. The closings in Nueces Canyon marked the beginning of the end of the Spanish empire's expansion into Texas from Mexico.



LODGING AND OUTFITTERS IN NUECES CANYON

The Cable Cabin, a block east of Lindbergh Park, hosts up to 20 guests spread over the main cabin, which sleeps nine. There are also two classic RVs and two vintage Cavalier travel trailers. 201 N. San Antonio St., Camp Wood. 512-300-6656; cablecabin.net

Arrowhead on the Nueces includes a large house that sleeps 12, a cottage that sleeps four, and five basic cabins. It sits on 7 acres along Old Faithful Creek and the Nueces, a half-mile north of town. 921 SH 55, Camp Wood. 830-597-4421; arrowheadnueces.com

Mill Wheel on the Nueces offers a house, a lodge, and two cottages. \$250 per night and up. 214 N. Nueces St., Camp Wood. 830-597-4411; millwheelonthenueces.com

Los Rios Campground has cabins and dedicated river access, and it's within walking distance of The Quince. 751 River Road, Camp Wood. 830-597-4239; losrioscampground.com

Wes Cooksey County Park, 3 miles south of town, has RV spaces and camping. 33719 SH 55, Camp Wood. 830-597-3223

The Riv, located across and above the Arnold Crossing dam, features new luxury cabins. 140 CR 417, Uvalde. theriv.com

Big Oak River Camp is a campground and RV park with log cabins on its own stretch of the Nueces, 4.5 miles south of Camp Wood. 32598 SH 55, Camp Wood. 830-597-5280; bigoakrivercamp.com

Jesse Falcon shuttles tubers and kayakers (\$40 per shuttle)—and rents kayaks (\$25 per day)—from Barksdale down to the dam, a 6- to 8-mile run, or from the dam down below Montell. 830-591-4411

Following the end of the Texas Revolution, in 1836, Mexico regarded the Nueces River as the southern border of the break-away territory. That is, until the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, formalizing the southern boundary as the Rio Grande. In 1857, the U.S. Army established Camp Wood, near the site of Mission San Lorenzo, as a deterrent to Native American raids. But the camp was abandoned at the start of the Civil War. The town of Camp Wood was eventually founded in 1921 as the railhead for logging cedar.

I RETURNED TO NUECES Canyon a few weeks after visiting with Holder. I wanted to drive from the headwaters down toward Camp Wood, a dramatic drop of 1,000 feet in elevation. I came this time to meet the River Whisperer.

Sky Jones-Lewey, a chestnut-haired 60-something whose steely eyes portray a no-nonsense demeanor, lives on a ranch at the south end of Nueces Canyon. I call her the River Whisperer because she has spent most of her life learning about the Nueces River and all things riparian. She shares that knowledge as resource protection and education director for the Nueces River Authority. Her publication *Your Remarkable Riparian: A Field Guide to Riparian Plants Within the Nueces River Basin of Texas* is a bible of information about Texas river sedges, grasses, ferns, woody plants, and trees.

The Nueces is Jones-Lewey's river. She took me to its edge, just downstream from the low-water crossing in the Camp Wood Hills subdivision west of Camp Wood. We parked in a cleared lot she said used to be a dumping ground—"trash, animals, everything"—but is becoming a county park. I was surprised to find such a great spot to take a swim, which I promptly did after she offered her mask and snorkel. As I immersed, I thought back to the detailed explanation of the Nueces' immaculate state Jones-Lewey emailed me in advance of my trip.

"Nueces basin headwater streams (Nueces, Frio, Sabinal, etc.) are so incredibly clear because they are naturally carrying almost no nutrients, like nitrogen and phosphorus," she wrote, "and so far, no nutrient-rich wastewater has been allowed



“THIS IS THE LAST OF THE PRISTINE RIVERS IN TEXAS,” SAID SKY JONES-LEWEY, AKA THE RIVER WHISPERER. “IT’S EXTREMELY CLEAN.”

FROM LEFT: Nature’s drying machine; kayaking on Lake Nueces south of Camp Wood.

to be added to any of them.” According to Jones-Lewey, the towns and camps across the Nueces headwaters utilize the soil, via land application, for their wastewater disposal, with zero discharge into the river.

The clarity of the Nueces, she continued, has to do with the river’s unique underwater landscape. “The base of the aquatic food web in this desert is a delicate community of periphyton (algae, bacteria, and other microbes) that have found ways to prosper on bare rock. These plant-like organisms are harvested by teams of tiny specialized May and Caddis fly larvae, beetles, and snails that are in turn eaten by the Nueces plateau shiner, Spring salamanders, and other endemic species.”

Between dips in the river, we discussed water, riparian habitat, and humans’ relationship to and impact on the environment.

The good news is, while some rivers and waterways in Texas are either polluted, compromised, or threatened, the rivers of the Nueces basin—the Sabinal, Frio, and Nueces—don’t attract near the number of visitors that the Guadalupe and Colorado river basins do, although prime swim spots get crowded on summer weekends.

“This is the last of the pristine rivers in Texas,” Jones-Lewey said during one swimming break. “It’s extremely clean.”

Robert Mace, a hydrologist who is executive director of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment in San Marcos, agrees. “Due to its rural and remote locale, and the perpetual gnawing of water against the limestones of the Edwards Plateau,” he said, “the headwaters of the Nueces are among the most pleasing in the state.”

This is in large part due to the work of Jones-Lewey, who led the Nueces River Authority’s efforts to help persuade the Texas Legislature to ban driving in riverbeds. Sitting on the rocky beach at water’s edge, she illustrated why, scraping away large, dry rocks at our feet to reveal pebbles

of wet gravel underneath. “The river’s here, too,” she said. “We just can’t see it with all these rocks in the way.”

The Nueces was all that I thought it would be: some of the best swimming around, with calm and cool waters, free of debris and with clear visibility. Hovering below the surface, rhythmically reaching one arm out after the other, steadily paddling my extended toes, I felt like I was floating in a state of suspended animation. Locals are cautiously optimistic the river will continue to allow a magical experience. Awareness about respecting and protecting it has been raised, slowly but surely.

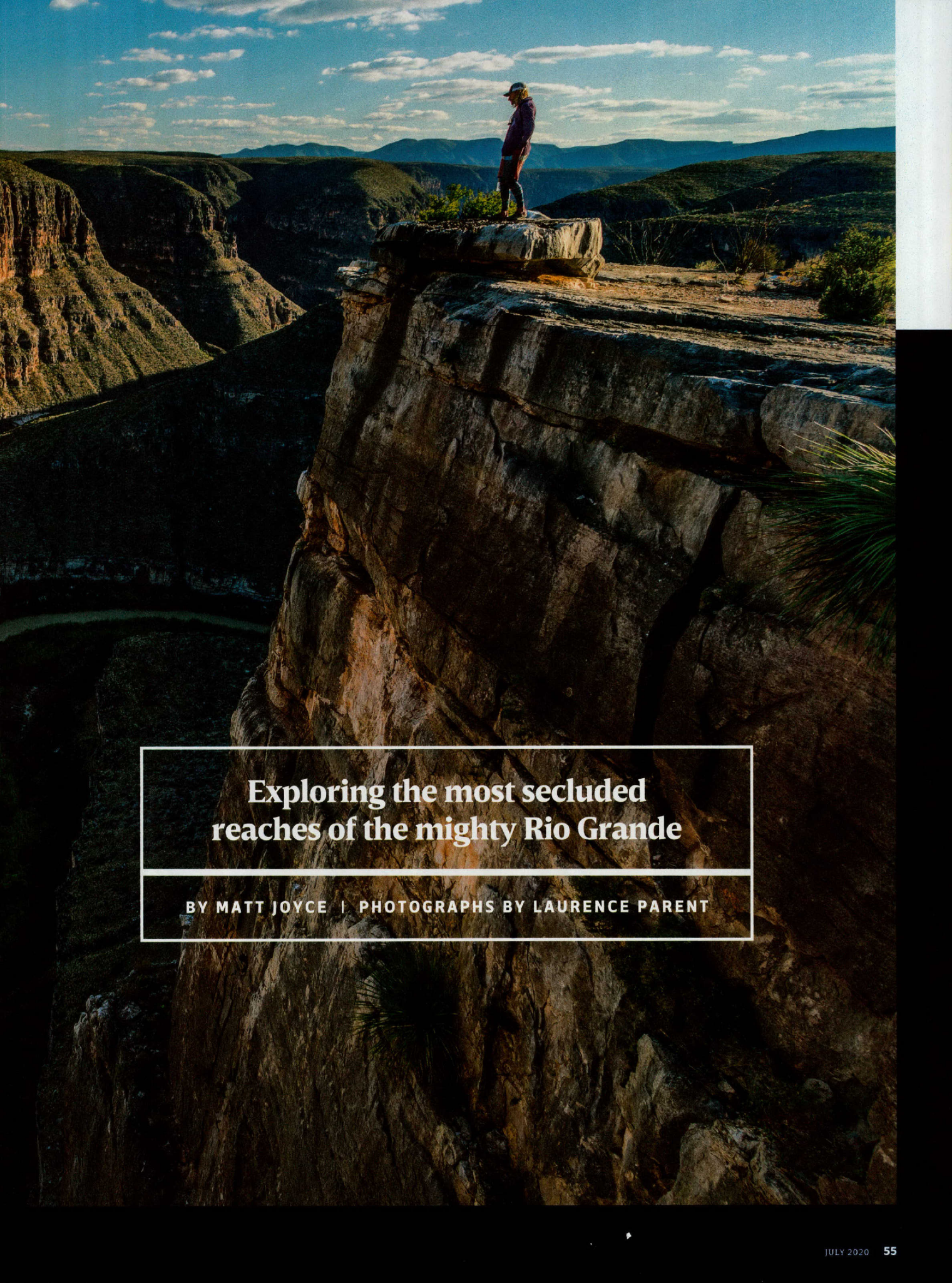
“The river’s in good shape because there are miles and miles of undisturbed streambed,” Jones-Lewey said. “People have not done anything to it. So far.”

The love for the river is deep and wide, and lives on forever in Nueces Canyon High’s school song:

Down below the plains of Texas, / where the hills arise, / there’s a land of sparkling waters, / canyons and blue skies. / Ring ye Nueces High with music, / we praise your power and might. / Hail to thee Nueces Panthers, / hail to Blue and White. / FIGHT PANTHERS! / FIGHT PANTHERS! / FIGHT! / FIGHT! / FIGHT! 🐾

An aerial photograph of a deep canyon system. The canyon walls are characterized by distinct horizontal layers of rock, likely sandstone or limestone, which are partially covered with green vegetation. A river flows through the bottom of the canyon, its water appearing somewhat turbid. The lighting suggests a bright day, with shadows cast across the canyon walls. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue with a few wispy white clouds.

THE LOWER CANYONS



**Exploring the most secluded
reaches of the mighty Rio Grande**

BY MATT JOYCE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURENCE PARENT



The bovine skull came into view as we rounded a bend on the Rio Grande, setting a scene like the desert backdrop of a Wile E. Coyote cartoon. With its muzzle down, horns up, and carcass stretched as flat as a carpet, the cow had apparently come to the dirt bank and lay down for its final rest. Only the effects of time and weather had disturbed it since.

Drifting past the desolate sight, I marveled at the glory and isolation of exploring one of Texas' wildest places—the Lower Canyons of the Rio

Grande. Last November, I joined photographer Laurence Parent and a party of nine others for an 83-mile paddling trip along the Texas-Mexico border. For seven days, we followed the river's verdant strip through a chain of dramatic canyons bisecting the rocky slopes and arid flats of the Chihuahuan Desert. We didn't see another soul for the entire trip, unless you count bighorn sheep, canyon wrens, and peregrine falcons.

"This is a good trip for people who want a true wilderness experience," said Greg Henington, the leader of our expedition

OPENING SPREAD: The view of the Rio Grande and Arroyo del Tule from Burro Bluff.

THIS SPREAD: Our group took four rafts and one canoe. “It’s one of the most remote places I’ve been anywhere in the U.S.,” photographer Laurence Parent said. “Although we had rain and clouds at times, the canyons are so beautiful I still got more good photos than I know what to do with.”



and the owner of Far Flung Outdoor Center, based in Terlingua. “It’s remote, wild, and vast. A lot of people don’t even realize this is down here in the Lower 48. But I would say this is not a trip for first-timers. You can get in trouble in a hurry.”

Only about 400 people run the Lower Canyons each year, according to Big Bend National Park. Though the Lower Canyons are downstream from the park boundary, the National Park Service requires backcountry permits for the trip because Congress has deemed this stretch of the Rio Grande a “Wild and Scenic River.” The

1978 designation calls for the park to work with local entities and landowners to protect the river environment for recreation.

It’s hard to imagine development springing up along this distant stretch of the Rio Grande, which runs northeast from Texas’ southernmost tip. We saw few signs of humanity across the meandering miles—a shuttered Mexican fluorspar processing plant, a couple of rickety fishing cabins, ancient mortar holes in the bedrock, a ranch house, ranging cattle, and a shack perched on a cliffside ledge with a pipe hanging down like a straw. Turns out

the shack was once a pumphouse, built 80 years ago to suck river water hundreds of vertical feet to a makeshift factory that extracted wax from candelilla plants.

For a sense of the Lower Canyons’ isolation, consider that nobody surveyed this part of the Rio Grande until 1899—30 years after John Wesley Powell made his pioneering trip through the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. A geologist named Robert T. Hill led the 1899 expedition. His detailed account, published in *The Century Magazine*, captures the highs and lows of a monthlong Rio Grande expedition



from Presidio to Langtry. Traveling in three heavy wooden boats, the six-man party weathered the extremes of desert climate, unpredictable rapids, and exhaustion. But Hill emerged a convert, and he later was a vocal advocate of the establishment of Big Bend National Park.

“The solemnity and beauty of the spectacle is overwhelming,” Hill reported. “One is constantly surprised by new types of sculpture and scenery. The sculpture is marked by queer, eccentric pinnacles projecting above the ragged skyline—spires, fingers, needles, natural bridges, and every conceivable form of peaked and curved rocks.”

Hill’s surprises are real. From my riverine perspective, I felt like I was floating through a gallery of grandiose landscape paintings, though not even Thomas Cole

could mimic these vistas. Around each bend, beautiful new horizons unfolded. At the famed Bullis Fold, the river bisected an anticline, where rock striations lifted like falcon wings from either bank. At another point, the evening sun highlighted Cerro El Sombrero, a solitary butte that rose like a hat crown over an empty expanse known as Outlaw Flats.

Then there was the mesmerizing spectacle of whitewater crashing over boulders. We were always on alert for the roar of rapids, a sound both seductive and menacing. Our trip navigated 13 rapids, some mild like tube chutes and others akin to riding a bull. I paddled several of them in the canoe, capsizing in the chilly water only twice, which was pretty good for me.

I was free to enjoy the scenery in large part because our trip was supported by

three hardworking guides. The members of our party took turns paddling the solo canoe, while Henington and the guides rowed four rafts packed with passengers, tents, sleeping pads, tables, folding chairs, a toilet, ice chests, food, water, and kitchen gear. Along with Henington, the guides handled the logistics of our caravan: They scouted rapids, picked campsites, and loaded and unloaded the rafts.

The guides were also responsible for the cooking—hearty dishes like New York strip steaks, chocolate cake, French toast, and Starbucks coffee—while I had the freedom of evening downtime to hike the surrounding canyons. At Silber Canyon, I soaked in hot springs of clear warm water that poured forth from a jumble of boulders before flowing into the muddy river. At Burro Bluff, I hiked to the top of a 900-



“For a week we didn’t think about cellphones or Instagram or any of that—it’s just dialogue among the group, solving puzzles on the river,” said Greg Henington, owner of Far Flung Outdoor Center. “It’s a great equalizer for all of us. I think, ‘Geez, if I can do this, I can do pretty much anything.’”



foot limestone face, then toyed with vertigo on the ledge, eyeing the sliver of river far below. At San Francisco Creek, I followed a dry, rocky tributary far enough inland that I could no longer hear the flow of the Rio Grande. It was the purest silence I've ever experienced. In the shifting breeze, I imagined wind whistling across cactus spines and the snooze of a napping mountain lion.

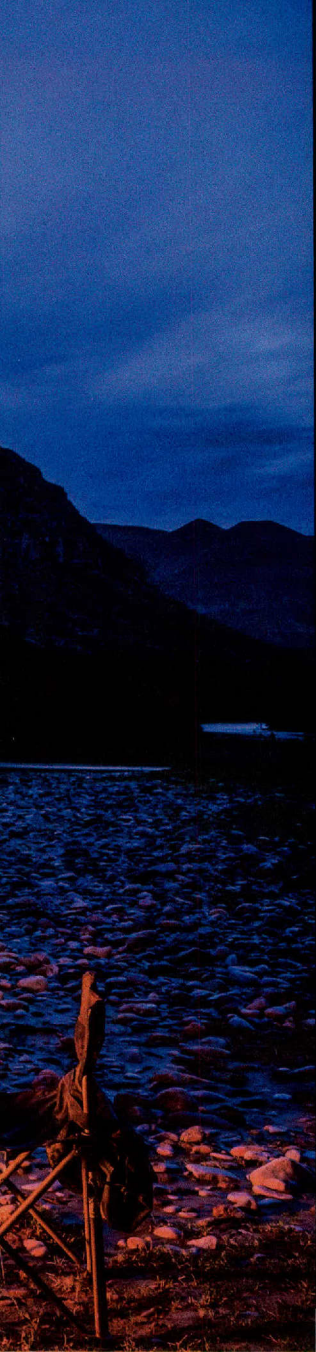
On these hikes, I'd watch the sun wane as Parent clicked photo after photo, always hungry for that perfect shot. Raised in the Desert Southwest, Parent has hiked the Big Bend region more than anyone else I've

met. But he knew moments like these were rare. "This is the third time I've been here," he reasoned, "and every time, I think I'll never be back."

It's interesting how wilderness can alter your perspective. Near the end of his journey 121 years ago, Hill was, understandably, ready to get back to civilization. "We no longer appreciated the noble surroundings," he wrote. "We longed only to escape from the walls, upon which we now began to look as a prison."

But for me, on a trip one-quarter the duration, the opposite was true. I remem-

ber breaking camp the fourth evening on a grassy bank near Palmas Canyon. After a couple of tough days of rain and near-freezing temperatures, the sky began to clear, and I set my gear out to dry in the desert air. In every direction, limestone bluffs hemmed the horizon, framing an open sky that darkened from marbled dusk to a sparkling Milky Way. In my daily life in Austin, walls stack up around me in a series of confinements—fences, high-rises, cubicles. But out on the Rio Grande, the walls of the Lower Canyons echo with liberation. **L**



LEFT: A riverside campfire. **RIGHT:** Pools in San Francisco Creek. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a time in my life with so much silence,” said Ruthie Douglass, of Sisters, Oregon. “Not lack of sound but simply no noise—just the sounds of the water, weather, wildlife, and our group. I don’t know how many places in the world you can go and get that.”



The most popular run on the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande spans 83 miles over seven to 10 days. Outfitters offer guided trips, or if you prefer to do the trip yourself, they can help with planning, equipment, and shuttles. Far Flung Outdoor Center's eight-day guided trip with meals costs about \$1,700 per person. Helpful resources include *The Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande*, by Louis F. Aulbach and Joe Butler, and the Big Bend Natural History Association's *River Guide to the Rio Grande: The Lower Canyons*. 432-371-2633; farflungoutdoorcenter.com.

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PLATES



FISHERMEN
cast their lines
from Mustang
Island's jetties.

Catch of the Day

With just a few supplies, you can whip up a delicious meal from Gulf to table

By E. Dan Klepper

A DISCO is a great vessel for cooking fresh Gulf fish.

Growing up in a South Texas household of outdoor enthusiasts made fishing along the Gulf Coast a routine family affair. We spent our springs hooking red drum in the bays and our summers pulling king mackerel, amberjack, pompano, and red snapper from offshore waters. At 14, I hooked my only sailfish, a leviathan that leapt out of the water, flashed its sail-like dorsal fin, then defiantly spit out the hook before it disappeared into the deep blue.

Had I caught the sailfish, I would have eaten it. We ate everything we could legally catch and prepared our wild fish in midcentury American fashion: whole flounder baked in lemon zest, butter, and parsley; mackerel beer-battered and fried; broiled red drum coated in spicy mayonnaise; catfish rolled in crunchy pepper cornmeal; crab and shrimp boiled in bouillon, onion, and red pepper; and raw oysters topped with lemon juice, Tabasco, and horseradish.

Our go-to fishing spot was Mustang Island, one of few inhabited islands in the long string of beaches, sand dunes, mangrove shallows, and seagrass flats that comprise the state's coastline. Development has overtaken some of the island's dunes and wetlands since my youth, but much of Mustang Island still exists in its natural state. Coyotes and rattlesnakes frequently share parking lots with RVs, and great flocks of shorebirds are often the only creatures utilizing the rolling surf and cinnamon shores. Sea turtles feed along the jetties and lay their eggs beneath the sand. Bayside, fields of seagrass billow in the tidal shallows like an underwater prairie. At Mustang's south end lies the Packery Channel, where seven years ago anglers pulled an 11-foot tiger shark out of the water—a notable but not unusual event.

Although the island offers many overnight options for today's visitors, I still prefer hauling a tent or a pop-up camper to Mustang Island State Park. The no-frills getaway was established in the 1970s and offers almost 4,000 acres of native coastal dunes and 5 miles of development-free beaches. For cooking,

Our go-to fishing spot was Mustang Island, one of few inhabited islands that comprise the state's coastline.

I bring a double-burner camp stove and a portable propane cooker with a large metal disc-shaped pan, called a *disco*, designed to sit on a ring above the flame. The disco, often compared to a Chinese wok, is believed to have originated as a plow disc for farming in the fields of Central or South America. But its precise origin is difficult to pinpoint. Both hand-forged and machine-made discos are readily available today, in either cast iron or stainless steel. Disco aficionados have their preferences, but cast-iron discos should be seasoned before use just like a cast-iron skillet.

The disco provides a very hot center for a quick, high-heat treatment of the ingredients before moving the delicate bits to the upper sides, where the temperature decreases. A disco and dependable heat source like a propane grill allow controllable beachside cooking without the hassle of charcoal or wood. A makeshift wind block helps steady the flame, and because the disco sits on legs above the ground, the device minimizes the amount of sand that ends up in everyone's meal.

Cooking fresh Gulf fish is a relatively straightforward task, but catching them can be a challenge. You'll need a bit of luck, and live bait like shrimp or mullet often work better than lures. Some anglers obsess over their rigs, but I've fished side by side with jokesters using children's plastic rods and reels who catch plenty of fish. Whatever you choose, make sure to have a valid fishing license and know size and catch limits. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department publishes and distributes a free fishing, boating, and hunting guide each year with information and illustrations.

A good place to try your luck is along

photo courtesy of Gary Wylie and Jim McHale

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Mustang Island's bayside, especially if you enjoy kayaking. TPWD offers paddling trails that can be accessed from designated points along the bay, including a man-made channel called Wilson's Cut midway down the island. The trail route delivers kayaking anglers to a maze of flats and seagrass shallows along relatively calm waters where spawning redfish and flounder dwell.

My preferred island fishing spots are the jetties. During a recent trip, I had a particularly good day despite a heavy east wind and swells that swallowed the jetties' massive blocks of granite. As soon as I cast my bait net I snagged a school of mullet riding the wave crests, perfect for live bait. My fellow anglers

**Cooking fresh fish in
the disco is simple.
It doesn't take very
long and accommodates
just about any flavor
and texture.**

and I caught gafftopsail catfish, then red drum, and, after the reds stopped striking, Spanish mackerel and spotted seatrout. Brown pelicans perched along the jetty blocks waiting for handouts, sea turtles surfaced and sank, crabs scuttled

in the shallow granite pockets, and sea snails clung to the crevices. In one brief moment, a shark sheared off my rig like a straight razor.

Back at camp, the disco heated up quickly courtesy of the propane flame. We cleaned our catch, then added some oil and fillets to the pan, stirred in veggies and spices, heated up corn tortillas along the upper tier, and gave them a quick flip in the hot oil to finish them off. Cooking fresh fish in the disco is simple. It doesn't take very long and accommodates just about any flavor and texture you might like to include in your meal.

The most memorable beachside cooking I've done was also the easiest. I particularly succeeded with a poor

RECIPE

Gafftopsail Catfish Tacos

INGREDIENTS:

4 tablespoons olive oil
 4 catfish fillets, cubed
 ½ sweet yellow onion, diced
 2 red bell peppers, sliced
 4 cloves garlic, diced
 Dried, crushed red chiles and sea salt to taste
 Tortillas or taco shells
 2 cups shredded red cabbage
 2 avocados, sliced
 1 lemon, wedged

DIRECTIONS:

Heat oil in the center of the disco. Once hot, drop in catfish, onion, bell pepper, garlic, and crushed chiles. Stir. Once fish is white and flaky, remove mixture from disco. Salt to taste. Serve on tortillas or taco shells and garnish with cabbage, avocados, and a squirt of lemon.

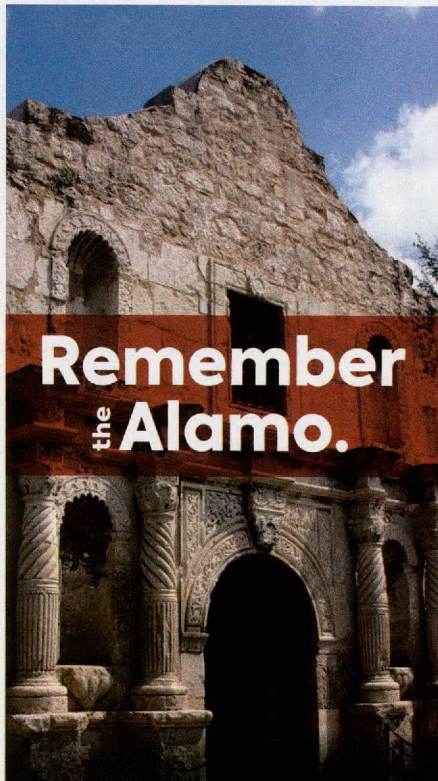
man's bouillabaisse, a stock sometimes referred to as a *fumet*, but more likely recognized as fish head soup. As I cleaned that day's catch of spotted seatrout, I tossed everything but the fillets—heads, tails, fins, and organs—into a large, deep stockpot. The sight of a fish head floating to the surface of a cooking pot can be pretty unappetizing, but I was encouraged by the progress of the flavors. By the time I filtered the stock through a strainer, I knew I had discovered my ideal island meal. The result added up to more than just the sum of its parts: the delicious primitive aroma; the zest of spices, onions, and herbs; and the savory flavor that arises from fresh-caught seafood. The broth embodied everything I love about the island in one simple bowl—the moonlit surf, the cordgrass dunes, the salt-spray breeze, and all the pleasures of the catch rendered down to the taste of the sea. 🌊

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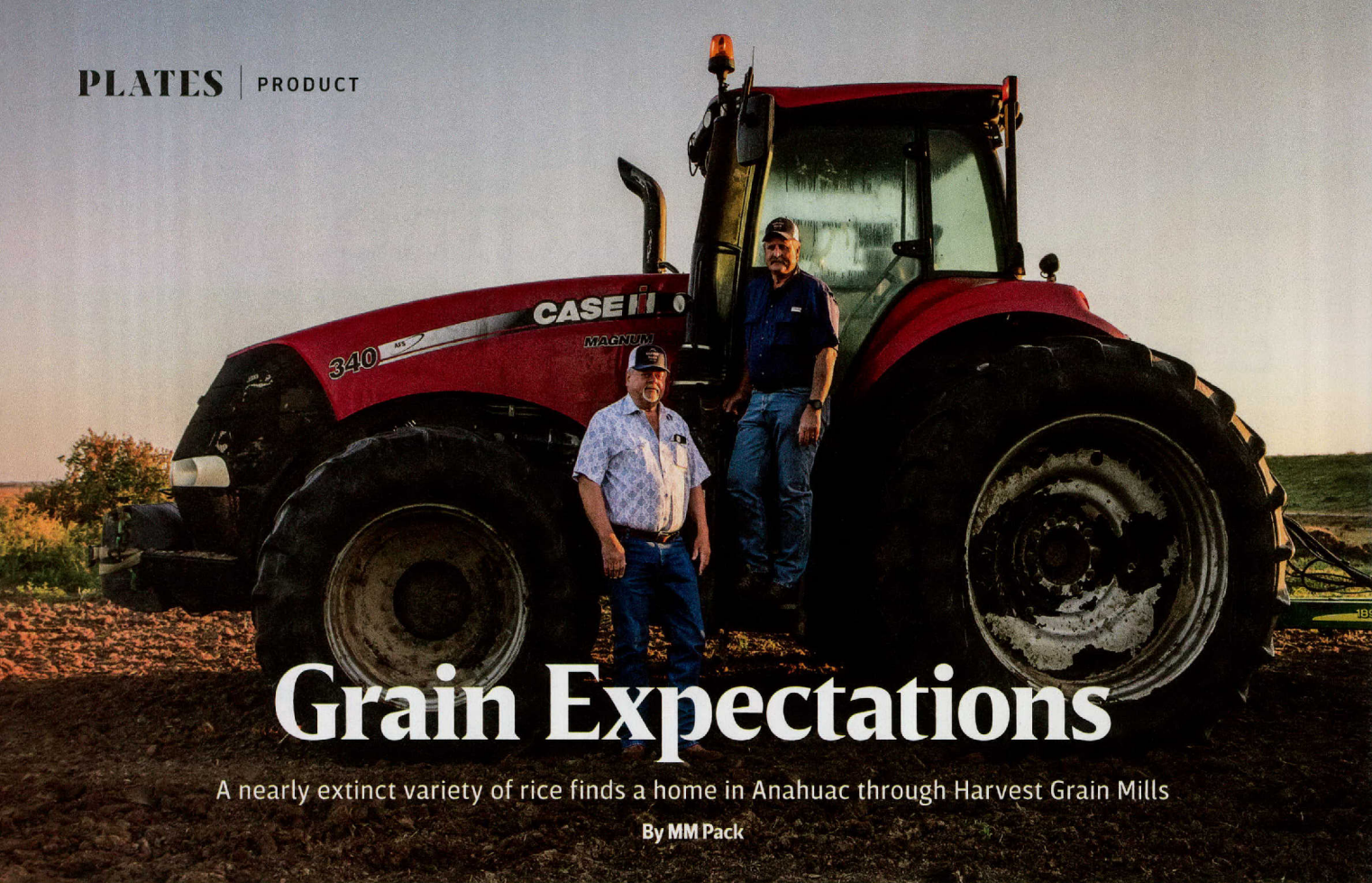
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Grain Expectations

A nearly extinct variety of rice finds a home in Anahuac through Harvest Grain Mills

By MM Pack

Carolina Gold rice was introduced to North America in 1685 and became the most valued rice in the country by the time of the Civil War. South Carolina farmers grew it as a cash crop, producing millions of pounds. Without enslaved labor, though, commercial production collapsed, and this variety had nearly gone extinct by the 1920s.

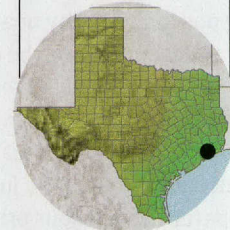
But now, thanks to a resurgent interest in heritage grains—ancient varieties of wheat that have minimal genetic alteration or hybridization—Carolina Gold rice is beginning to flourish again. Anahuac, a town of about 2,400 an hour east of Houston, is home to Harvest Grain Mills, owned by cousins David Kirkham and Donald Wilcox, who grow and mill organic Carolina Gold.

Kirkham and Wilcox grew up farming rice with their fathers in Anahuac. Early settlers in the area deemed the terrain most suitable for cattle and rice, and those traditions continue. Irrigation canals cross the landscape, enabling the controlled flooding needed to grow rice. Kirkham returned to rice farming in 2014 following a career in computer technology, while Wilcox “raised rice and kids” all his adult life. Kirkham’s sister Jannie Kirkham handles marketing and customer relations. “It’s a family operation,” she says.

While the cousins harvested their first crop of Carolina Gold in 2016, the grain’s comeback actually started more than 30 years ago in South Carolina, with Texas playing a vital role. In the mid-1980s, South

Carolinan ophthalmologist and duck hunter Richard Schultze became curious about Carolina Gold rice—he wanted to attract ducks to his land and taste the rice described in old cookbooks. After learning the USDA Rice Research Laboratory in Beaumont had some in its seed bank, Schultze asked Texas agronomist Charles Bollich to propagate Carolina Gold grains for him. The plantings on Schultze’s South Carolina farm were successful. This led to a collaboration with Glenn Roberts, founder of Anson Mills, a Charleston-based company that produces organic heirloom grains. The revival sparked significant interest among chefs because of the rice’s flavor and versatility. Today, Texas is one of the few places in the United States growing Carolina Gold rice, thanks to Harvest Grain Mills.

HARVEST GRAIN MILLS products are available on harvestgrainmills.com. You can also find them at Victoria’s Natural Market in Tomball, and in Houston locations like Urban Harvest Farmers Market, Central City Co-Op, Pat Greer’s Kitchen, and Henderson & Kane General Store.



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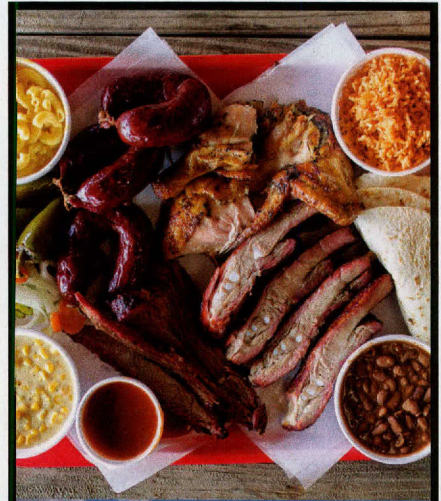
While they're still farming conventionally grown rice in some fields around Winnie and Beaumont, the cousins' goal is to transition to growing only organic Carolina Gold and Charleston Gold, an aromatic, longer-grain hybrid released in 2012. Eventually, the family intends to open a storefront at the mill and conduct tours and demonstrations. They're looking forward to developing relationships with Texas chefs and home cooks who appreciate their flavorful rice. "We feel honored to help keep Carolina Gold rice in production," Kirkham says, "since it is literally the beginning of the rice industry in our country." 🍌

ALL ABOUT ANAHUAC

Designated as the "Alligator Capital of Texas," Anahuac is located on the shore of Lake Anahuac and is the county seat for sparsely populated Chambers County, part of the greater Galveston Bay area. It began as a Mexican fort built in 1830; its Aztec name means "land on the edge of the water." Anahuac was the site of two pre-Texas Revolution skirmishes between Anglo settlers and Mexican soldiers—today, Fort Anahuac Park marks the location. The terrain might be compared to South Carolina's Low Country—hot, marshy, and wooded, with lots of rain. This area of the Gulf Coast contains several wildlife refuges and is a destination for fishing and birdwatching. Anahuac celebrates an annual Gator Fest each September.

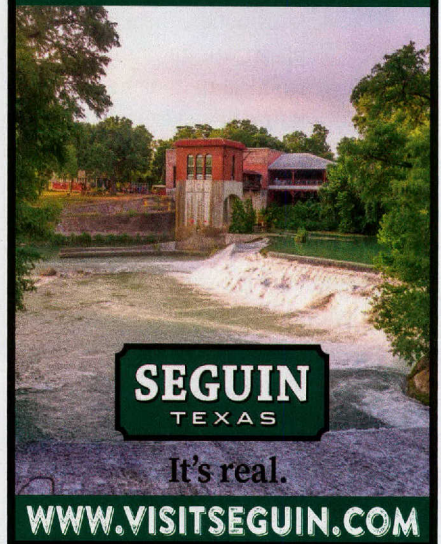


FROM LEFT: Donald Wilcox (left) and David Kirkham, owners of Harvest Grain Mills; Carolina Gold and Charleston Gold rice.



You might call it
"Real America, or
"Real Texas."

**WE CALL IT
SEGUIN.**





NATASSIA BROOKS works the bar at Crab-N restaurant.

Tough Shell to Crack

Despite debilitating setbacks, a favorite Aransas Pass area restaurant soldiers on

By MM Pack

Terry Brooks doesn't really know where the name for his restaurant Crab-N came from. Something he does know, however, is that it takes more than a hurricane and a global pandemic to prevent his popular coastal spot from doing what it's always done: serve fresh seafood and drinks, and look after customers, employees, and friends. The Brooks family has been through hell and high water but continues the restaurant's mission with grace and pride.

Perched on pilings and overlooking a residential canal, Crab-N was established in 1976 by Terry's dad, Woodrow Wilson "Ted" Brooks, in the tiny community of City-by-the Sea, between Aransas Pass

and Rockport. Terry and his twin brother, Randy, took over operations in 1978, and it's been a convivial local destination ever since. Known for its BYOF (bring your own fish) option and fresh cocktails, locals and visitors alike congregate to meet and eat.

Sadly, in the past few years, the Brooks family has experienced multiple tragedies. "Aug. 25, 2017," Terry says quietly. That's the day Hurricane Harvey slammed directly into Rockport, smashing much of the Coastal Bend to smithereens, including the Crab-N restaurant 5 miles away, which was damaged beyond repair. Then, three months later, Randy died of pancreatic cancer. "We didn't consider not starting over," Terry says. But his daughter

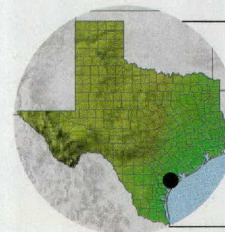
Natassia Brooks recalls being daunted by the obstacles. "We had no idea of the challenges we were taking on," she says.

Start again they did. As many Texans discovered, insurance payouts after Harvey didn't come close to the sums required to rebuild. The Friends of Crab-N, a coterie of customers, put together a loan to cover the shortfall, and the restaurant reopened on Feb. 1, 2020, after being closed for two and a half years. "We added a deck and reoriented the dining room to take best advantage of the views," Terry says. "People like to look at the water while they eat."

The reopening wasn't meant to be grand. "We didn't advertise, and we wanted to start slowly, working out the kinks," Terry explains. "Although 80% of our former employees returned, there were some new ones too, and everyone had to learn the new computer system." But word of mouth and social media did their thing; 150 people showed up the first night, including some Friends of Crab-N who met face to face for the first time. One was Alto resident Ron Rose, who's kept a weekend home in City-by-the Sea since 1994. "It's a testimony to the family that so many employees came back after two and half years," he says.

Server Beverly Trent has worked at Crab-N since 1980. She's one of a handful of employees who's been there longer than 20 years. She's remained involved so long because of the Brookses. "The family has always been supportive to the staff, helping us out when we've needed help," she says.

Although the Brookses claim no Louisiana roots, Crab-N bills itself as a Cajun/Creole-style restaurant. "In the early '80s, we were looking for menu



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City-by-the-Sea,
361-758-2371;
crab-n.com

ideas," Terry says. "On vacation in New Orleans, we loved eating at K-Paul's, and I bought their brand-new cookbook [Chef Paul Prudhomme's *Louisiana Kitchen*]." Crab-N used a couple of Prudhomme's original recipes when starting out. Over the years, the dishes have been adapted and changed, and new recipes have been added.

Some of the restaurant's popular dishes are crab and shrimp bisque, pecan-crust-ed flounder topped with crab relish, and crab cakes. Natassia notes they're experimenting with some Asian-influenced dishes. "We just like good-tasting food, and we want to keep innovating," she says. The restaurant also features a full bar with signature drinks including a pear martini and a variety of margaritas made with fresh fruits, fruit juices, and house-made simple syrup.

About 30% of the fish the restaurant cooks is brought in by customers. Nearby

"Being a small-business owner obviously has a lot of challenges, but we've learned that you can do more than you think you can."

Redfish Bay and Estes Flats team with sport fish like spotted seatrout, redfish, black drum, flounder, and sheepshead. The kitchen can prepare these catches in a variety of ways, including grilled, fried, blackened, and pan-seared, and pair them with a signature sauce such as crab-and-shrimp buttercream or crawfish.

As the revitalized Crab-N was humming along, getting its groove back, disaster struck again with COVID-19. "After only

six weeks open, we had to close again on March 15," Terry says. But he remained optimistic during the downtime, tweaking recipes, updating seasonings, and applying for aid to help pay employees. "If you aren't improving things, you're falling behind," he says.

Because there were few COVID-19 cases in sparsely populated Aransas County, the county allowed Crab-N to open at 50% capacity on May 1. "Business is steady, mainly local people," Trent says. Efforts have included disinfecting chairs, tables, and menus; directing customers to the sanitizing station as they enter; and requiring masks and gloves be worn in the kitchen.

"God's been good to us, and we'll be OK," Terry says, reflecting on the roller-coaster ride. "Being a small-business owner obviously has a lot of challenges, but we've learned that you can do more than you think you can." **L**



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TNN



The Legend of Jean Lafitte

The polemical pirate spent only three years on Galveston Island, but he left a lasting impression

By Pam LeBlanc

On Galveston Island's east end, behind a rusting chain-link fence, the concrete bones of an old structure sit between a residential home and a metal-sided warehouse. Aside from a state historical marker out front, there's little sign this overgrown lot was once the encampment of Texas' most infamous pirate, Jean Lafitte.

From 1817–20, Lafitte headquartered his smuggling business on Galveston Island, which was then part of Spanish Texas. He and his older brother, Pierre, patrolled the Gulf of Mexico as pseudo-agents of New World governments that had revolted against Spain, exploiting the naval routes that linked the Gulf Coast to the rest of the globe.

"There's a real cachet about pirates, even if the legends take on a life of their own," says Stephen Curley, a retired English professor from Texas A&M University at Galveston who lectures about Lafitte. "The legends and lies and truths about Lafitte are great fun, but some of the reality is pathetic and tragic."

Nothing remains of Lafitte's old Galveston village, which he named Campeche, because he burned much of it when fleeing the island under pressure from Louisiana Gov. William Claiborne. The crumbling arches and steps now occupying the lot on Harborside Drive had nothing to do with Lafitte—they were part of a home built decades after the pirate died. Still, one can imagine his dashing figure on the humid coastline directing boat raids, steering ships into the natural harbor, and sorting booty he raided up and down the Gulf Coast.

"He was very handsome and gentlemanly—suave, well dressed, charming, and charismatic," says Lou Graves MacBeth, vice president of the Galveston-based Laffite Society, echoing the portrayals found in historical depictions. "The women loved him. He could get them anything they wanted and sell it to them cheaper than merchants."

Except for a few letters and accounts from contemporaries, and some notarized documents in New Orleans, where Lafitte

conducted much of his business before moving to Galveston, hard facts about Texas' most famous smuggler remain elusive. "Outlaws don't keep good records," Curley notes.

Historians believe Lafitte was born in France, or possibly the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, around 1790. He spelled his name Laffite, but English documents switched the spelling to Lafitte, and it stuck. He began his criminal career in New Orleans around 1805 when he worked with Pierre to peddle stolen goods. Though he's remembered as a pirate, he was late to the game; the golden age of piracy had fizzled a century earlier under pressure from the British navy. Lafitte acted more like a mob boss than a sword-wielding swashbuckler, even though paintings sometimes depict him wearing a plumed hat (he probably didn't).

"I don't think there was any walking of the plank in the days of Lafitte," Curley says. "Those swashbuckling tales are the stuff of Robert Louis Stevenson."

The Lafitte brothers eventually moved their headquarters to Barataria Bay, in the swampland south of New Orleans. As a privateer—an agent for hire—Jean held a "letter of marque" from Cartagena, a port on the coast of Colombia. It gave him a flimsy guise of legality to board Spanish ships and seize their cargo, which he then sold at auction. Louisiana officials didn't approve of the Lafitte brothers' ways, but they were popular among the citizenry because their goods were inexpensive. And after Lafitte and his men aided American forces in the Battle of New Orleans, the last major clash of the War of 1812, U.S. President James Madison granted him a pardon.

Lafitte kept up his smuggling after the war until pressure from authorities forced him to leave Louisiana and move to the windswept sandbar of Galveston in 1817. Ousting a few other low-rung smugglers in the process, he established Campeche. His home, reportedly painted red, was dubbed *Maison Rouge*.

An estimated 1,000 people, mostly men, lived in the encampment at its peak, Curley says, but in 1818 a storm swamped



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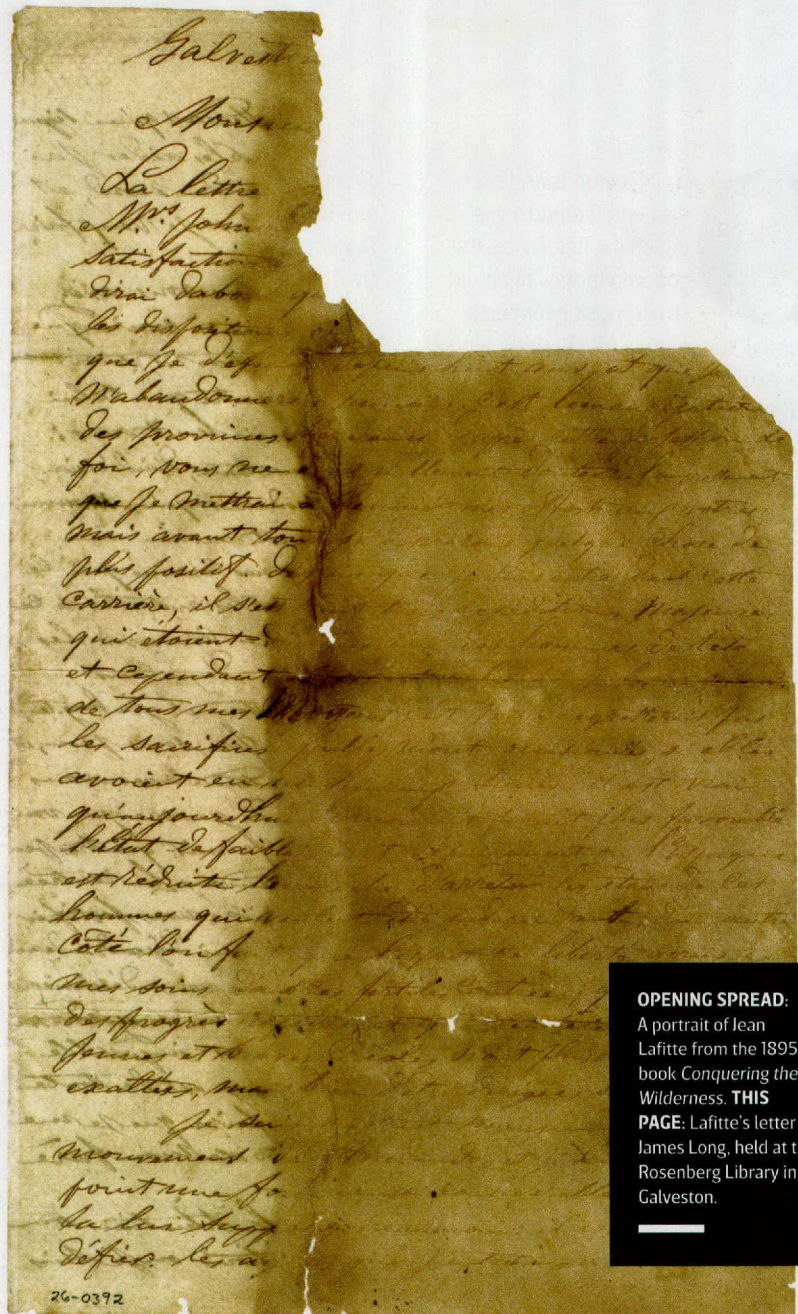
Jean Lafitte in Galveston

Maison Rouge, 1417 Harborside Drive. Though Lafitte's home is gone, this property across the street from the Port of Galveston contains the ruins of a later structure and a trove of ghost tales.

The Laffite Society, which promotes historical research and education about Lafitte's life and times, meets the second Tuesday of each month. Meetings are open to the public. Check the group's Facebook page for schedule updates.

facebook.com/
thelaffitesociety

Pier 21 Theater, 2100 Harborside Drive, offers daily screenings of the short film *The Pirate Island of Jean Lafitte*.
pier21galveston.com



OPENING SPREAD: A portrait of Jean Lafitte from the 1895 book *Conquering the Wilderness*. **THIS PAGE:** Lafitte's letter to James Long, held at the Rosenberg Library in Galveston.

much of the island and destroyed many of Lafitte's ships. In 1820, after one of his men raided an American ship, the U.S. Navy evicted him again. Lafitte set sail, perhaps for the Yucatán, and survived for another few years before he died around 1823. Historians differ on the cause of his death: Theories include fatal injuries in a battle with Spanish merchant vessels and illness.

Today, Lafitte is remembered romantically in Galveston, where costumed "Lafittes" stroll The Strand during Mardi Gras. In the early 1900s, the Galveston Pirates took the field in minor league baseball, and pirate references pop

up all over the island. A gay bar called Robert's Lafitte has been around for 45 years, while builders tag their developments with names like Chateau Lafitte Townhomes and Laffite's Cove.

At the Pier 21 Theater in downtown Galveston, a short film called *The Pirate Island of Jean Lafitte* shows daily and explores the contradictions of a man who plundered ships but is beloved as a daring buccaneer. On The Strand, a small museum called Pirates! Legends of the Gulf Coast draws tourists to its gallery, which chronicles Lafitte's life story and connection to the area. It also features a replica pirate ship, where actors portraying pirates

mingle with guests. Ghost hunters have been known to pay nighttime visits to the Harborside Drive lot where Maison Rouge allegedly stood. They tell of unexplained sounds of arguing, gunfire, and a pack of howling dogs, thought to be the spirits of animals provided by a voodoo queen to protect Lafitte's home.

But historians say some of Lafitte's background has been sugarcoated in popular culture. For example, Lafitte participated in the slave trade, selling humans he had captured on ships. "Lafitte made much money trafficking in human lives," Curley says. "He worked in the slave trade, and that was the most lucrative trade of

“Do pirates bury treasure? Nah. They’re like addicted gamblers—they go to Vegas and gamble until they lose.”

all. That’s the kind of story that just doesn’t get told much.”

Lafitte’s work took him up and down the Texas coast, creating legends along the way. Many of the stories involve hidden treasure, and Galveston is ground zero for such tales. In one, an unidentified skull in an antiques shop holds clues to where Lafitte’s treasure is buried. In another, the treasure is buried at a place once called Three Trees, near the Pirate Beach community.

“Any place you could put a boat in, every single coastal area from Matagorda to New Orleans, has Lafitte stories,” Curley says. But he doesn’t put any stock in such tales. “Do pirates bury treasure? Nah. They’re like addicted gamblers—they go to Vegas and win until they lose. But that doesn’t keep people from imagining.”

The Galveston & Texas History Center, on the fourth floor of the historic Rosenberg Library, holds a few more clues to Lafitte’s life, including two letters purportedly written by Lafitte. In one addressed to Gen. James Long—dated July 7, 1819, and bearing spidery script on weathered paper—he discusses Mexico’s desired independence from Spain. In another, addressed to President Madison, Lafitte seeks restitution for ships and goods that had been confiscated from him, arguing that he’d corrected his course since his youthful days in crime.

“My conduct since that period is notorious,” Lafitte contends. “The country is safe and I claim no merit for having, like all the inhabitants of the state, cooperated in its well fair [sic].”



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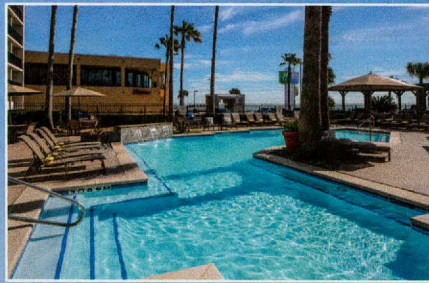
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so many restaurants on property, The San Luis Resort promises a dining experience for every whim. Enjoy a leisurely breakfast at Blake's Bistro, indulge in authentic Italian cuisine at Grotto, or escape to the award-winning restaurant, The Steakhouse. In addition to sumptuous amenities, enjoy an endless variety of Holiday brunches, events and entertainment perfect for couples, families and groups! Experience the very best in style, elegance and comfort at The San Luis Resort.

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THE DAYTRIPPER'S TOP 5

Glen Rose

The land that time forgot

BY CHET GARNER

A trip to Glen Rose feels like a trip back in time—and not just because its historic square is reminiscent of the pioneer days of Texas. The small town an hour southwest of Fort Worth takes visitors eons before that, to the days when dinosaurs roamed the Earth.



The Green Pickle

A day of dinosaurs deserves a breakfast of Jurassic proportions. Whether you opt for a massive omelet or biscuits and gravy, be sure to order this beer garden and eatery's signature breakfast dessert: a grilled honey bun. The ooey, gooey, buttery creation will have you roaring and ready to go.

Dinosaur Valley State Park

This state park boasts some of the most pristine dinosaur footprints in the world. You can hop into the Paluxy River and swim over the footprints preserved in the river's limestone bottom. You'll see the steps of giant Sauropods from when they walked the coastal wetlands that used to make up this part of Texas. And right behind them, you'll see the three-toed impressions left by Acrocanthosaurus, the Texas version of the T. rex.

Dinosaur World

Remember that Hollywood tale of a dinosaur park that went horribly wrong? Well, this one captures all the wonder of seeing life-size dinosaurs without the risk of becoming their next meal. Walk in the shadows of these sculptural mega-lizards that are placed in realistic settings all across the park. I'm awfully glad that many of them are no longer roaming Texas—or else I wouldn't be.

Fossil Rim Wildlife Center

If you're in the mood to see living animals, then head to this drive-thru wildlife park that's

packed with species from every continent (minus Antarctica). Watch from your car, or take an expert-guided group tour that will teach you about all the animals, from addax to zebras. No scientific fact can top the sensation of having a giraffe wrap its tongue around your fingers to steal a pellet of food.

Loco Coyote Grill

This folksy restaurant down a hidden country road has a weekend wait time that can stretch multiple hours. Come early, grab a drink at the bar, and relax while you wait to dive into one of the signature dishes. I recommend the Jack Daniel's BBQ Burger, a juicy behemoth with a burger patty, sliced brisket, cheese, onion rings, and fried pickles. It's a masterpiece that requires both hands, dozens of napkins, and a stomach with plenty of empty room. 🍴

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 Glen Rose episode visit thedaytripper.com. Follow along on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @chetripper.

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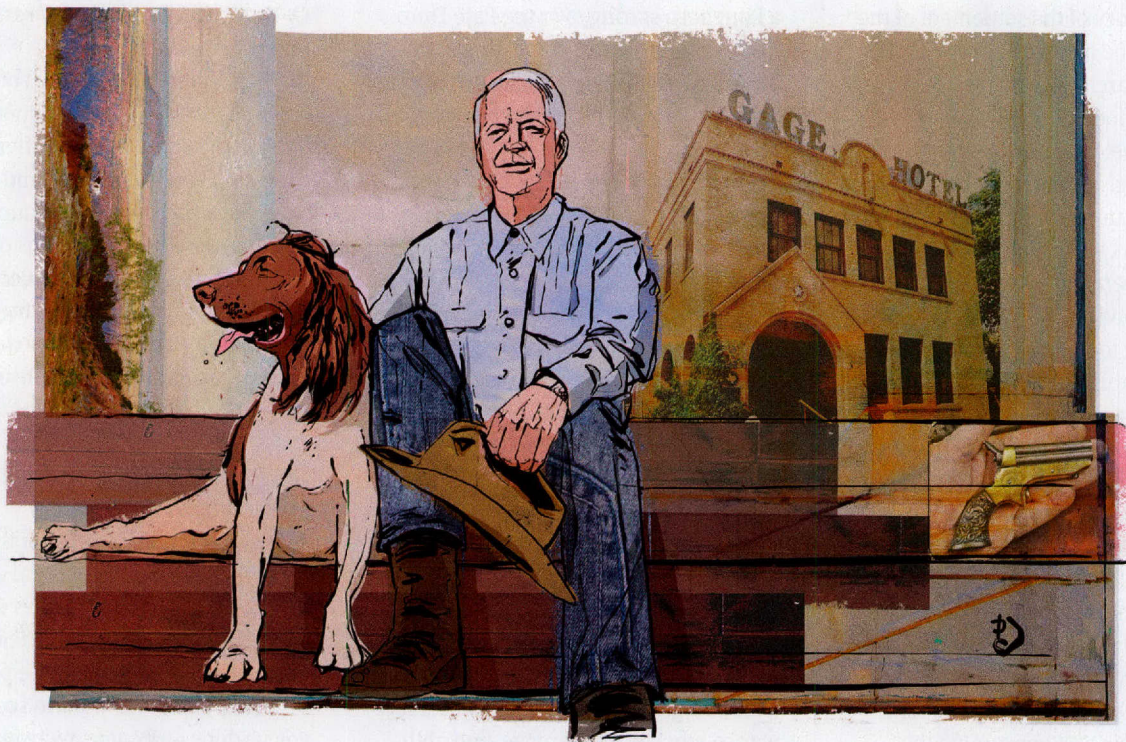
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Beyond the Artifacts

Businessman and preservationist J.P. Bryan has amassed a lifetime's worth of Texas history

By June Naylor

You'd be hard-pressed to find someone more fully connected to Texas history than J.P. Bryan. A relative of Stephen F. Austin—his great-great-grandmother was Austin's sister—Bryan grew up in Freeport with a dad who served as the president of the Texas State Historical Association. Bryan attended the University of Texas and found success in the energy business in Houston, which funded his passion for collecting and preserving objects of Texas history. Since the late 1970s, Bryan and his wife, Mary Jon Bryan, have also dedicated themselves to restoring old buildings, from the Gage Hotel in Marathon to a historic home in Round Top to an abandoned orphanage in Galveston, the latter of which the couple reopened five years ago as The Bryan Museum. It's not unusual for visitors to bump into Bryan, his faithful spaniel at his side, at the Gage or the Galveston museum, where he's known to lead impromptu tours and share stories about his acquisitions, such as the .22-caliber "Ladysmith" Smith & Wesson revolver

"So much of Texas deserves to be preserved for future generations. We have been so quick to build new things that we have neglected our past."

carried by the first female Texas Ranger, Allie Townsend, of Alpine. Bryan recently celebrated his 80th birthday, and though he marked the occasion with a public presentation at the Gage titled "Looking Back," the preservationist isn't done yet. Later this year, he plans to open a new museum in Marathon called Visions of the West, which will explore the history of the Trans-Pecos region.

Q: *The Bryan Museum contains more than 70,000 items. Where did you keep everything before the museum opened? And how did Galveston come to be the museum's home?*

A: Our offices in downtown Houston held much of the collection. When we decided to wind down the business in 2005, we began thinking about what to do with the collection. We'd already created a museum environment, with artifacts displayed in rooms. We had docents leading tours for school children, and we knew the visual experience in

telling the story of the settlement of the West would be impactful in a museum. In Houston, architects wanted to do something modern, and property was too expensive. We really wanted a historic building, and then our curator found the old orphanage on 21st Street. Once we walked in, we knew this was it. It had survived several hurricanes and was safe from flooding. No serious structural changes had to be made, though we had to install heating and cooling systems, and a green geothermal system that meant drilling more than 40 wells.

Q: Now with five years under the museum's belt, what are your reflections?

A: We have defined what we are, our character, and we're telling the story of Texas and the American West in a comprehensive way. We've defined our mission: to educate individuals, especially children, and to examine the conduct of the people who were part of the greatest events in the world's history. We're continuing to reshape education with outreach, creating whole curriculums for high schools. It's important to understand the freedoms that the settlers came here for. I've always had a real love for history, and how and why it happened. It needs to be told as truthfully as possible. It's not political; if you make it political, it becomes adversarial.

Q: What are some of your favorite items among the many saddles, weapons, artworks, and other artifacts in the Bryan's collection?

A: My first pistol is a four-barreled Sharps pistol I bought when I was 9 for about \$10 from money I'd saved up cutting the grass. Every time my father brought me with him to Houston from Freeport, where we lived, I'd eyeball it in an antique gun dealer's shop. Finally, I bought it. Of all the saddles, there's one in particular with a lot of silver detail work, made in Denver for a woman who lived in Delaware and raised Russian wolfhounds. I bought that in Cody, Wyoming. Of all the Frank Reaugh paintings, my favorite is one I call *Visions of the West*, with

a Longhorn staring over the Palo Duro Canyon. It epitomizes everything Reaugh thought of the Longhorn—he believed it was the embodiment of the pioneer spirit.

Q: After growing up on the Gulf Coast and spending your career in Houston, how did you wind up with a ranch and hotel in West Texas?

A: I didn't aim to have a big ranch. But my wife had ranching in her background, my grandfather was a rancher, and I liked working cattle as a child, so the idea of owning a ranch appealed to us. We began looking farther west, as the property was cheaper, and found the Chalk Draw Ranch in Brewster County, buying that in 1978. We bought the [Gage] Hotel in Marathon in 1979 because we needed a place to stay in town—it's almost an hour out to the ranch. It is a 1927 building and needed a great deal of work inside; there was so much water damage, and nothing worked. Gradually we added on the Los Portales addition in 1993 and bought buildings next door and in the block east for the restaurant, bar, and retail. We began buying up properties all around, as it's an interesting way to give historical perspective to the town. Now, 26 different homes and buildings go under the Gage umbrella. The Trans-Pecos is the last frontier in the Lower 48, without question, and that's why we'll open a small museum in Marathon later this year. We're calling it *Visions of the West*, dedicating it to the history of the Trans-Pecos and its people, including the Comanche and Apache.

Q: You sued Brewster County officials in March over their decision to temporarily close hotels in response to the coronavirus. How has the pandemic affected the Gage Hotel?

A: It's going to be a struggle to rebound. We lost \$600,000 from lost business and refunding money to guests, and another \$300,000 in payroll and other expenses. But we are resilient. This state was not built by people who ran and hid when faced with adversity. We are good at turning a face of optimism to it all.

Q: Your work has included restoring natural resources, too.

A: We restored 50,000 acres of grasslands on our West Texas properties. We filled in the draws created after 100 years of erosion and leveled the land so it could regenerate the grass. Then came deer, elk, and lots more quail, all forms of reptiles and birds, and the climate even changed. Nature gives back, all the things that stir the soul. The same narrative drives restoration, preservation, and conservation—they all give back bountifully.

Q: Why are historical restoration and preservation important?

A: I saw how historical restoration, if properly done, could be a real economic driver—in small communities especially, if they're struggling to find identities for themselves. If you treat these places with respect, people will want to see what you've done and come away with the conviction of wanting to give back. So much of Texas deserves to be preserved for future generations. We have been so quick to build new things that we have neglected our past. The effort in restoring the orphanage in Galveston and the Gage in Marathon resonates far beyond the walls of the buildings themselves. We will have 100,000 visitors between the two places this year, and guests will come away with stories to tell about the areas and their experiences. They tell a story about the phenomenal state we live in, and in a positive vernacular. 🇺🇸

J.P. Bryan's collection of Texas and Western historical relics is on display at The Bryan Museum in Galveston and the Gage Hotel in Marathon. He plans to open a new museum of Trans-Pecos history in Marathon later this year. thebryanmuseum.org; gagehotel.com

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Texans have always had a reverence for water, perhaps because we live on the edge of where it's abundant and where it is not. In this 110-year-old photo, Roy Brown rows with friends on the Guadalupe River in Kerrville. The Guadalupe flows 230 miles from western Kerr County to San Antonio Bay and has attracted human habitation for at least 5,000 years. "My great-uncle Roy was my grandmother Gussie May Brown's older brother," explains Leakey resident Jan Powell Wilkinson, who shared the photo. "His grandfather Joshua D. Brown was the first settler of Kerrville. Joshua moved from Kentucky in 1831." The circumstances of this photo have been lost, but Wilkinson says Roy graduated from Kerrville's Tivy High School the following year and moved to California, where he lived the rest of his life. **L**

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