



Audrey F. Merritt – Elaine Crider Hurt's Mother

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File: Hurt, Elaine Crider – Audrey F. Merritt, Mother of Elaine

I thought of these things for a while—sitting where I used to sit so often as a child, where I had listened to the big gray doves as they perched in the live oaks west of the house and soothed the air with their gentle calls: I thought about them and then got into the car again and began driving toward home.

It was clear that people had caught up with me—had gradually begun to nudge the country aside. For five hundred miles I had been loose on the land and now it seemed only fair that I yield to the demands of my own kind: to family, duties, memories. After all, I was due at a house, not at one of the pastures. So as I topped the last hill I opened all the windows and barreled on down—the cool sweet cedar air in my face, the familiar lights of Kerrville shining below.

CRIDER'S

PROBABLY NO ONE in the hill country—certainly not old man Crider—thought you could take a slab of cement, add some benches and a wire fence, and end up with a gold mine. Yet he did exactly that. And it turned out to be the best kind of gold mine, actually, not dependent on limited veins of ore but on unlimited human beings—on the twenty-five cents they will pay for a can of beer and the dollar bill admission they will dig up for Saturday night. So far, there is no indication that people or their money will ever play out, and Crider's seems destined to remain as solvent as any hill country bank.

There seem to be at least two Crider's—the one you go to, say, on a Saturday night and the one you might see the following day. A tourist, going for a Sunday drive along the river road west of Kerrville and suddenly coming upon Crider's at three o'clock in the afternoon, will most probably pull his Oldsmobile off the pavement and ask, incredulously, "You mean this is where we went to last night?" For daytime Crider's, minus the acres of parked cars, the blaring music, the sight and sense of people dancing and drinking and milling around, is wholly unprepossessing. Its essentials stand out sharply in all their bare country homeliness: the empty field of smooth cement,

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SATURDAY NIGHT is always the big night, of course. There is a string band—sometimes a local, inexperienced group from Kerrville or Fredericksburg, usually a more professional outfit from Austin or San Antonio—and extra counters set up for beer and cold drinks and the customary dollar admission charge. There are always several members of the Crider family working the gate—one collecting the dollar bills in a cigar box and the other stamping a black circular receipt on the back of each customer's hand: "Crider's, Since 1925."

Crider's has no specialized clientele. Indeed, the whole charm of it lies in the unself-conscious mingling of people who would ordinarily never rub shoulders except in a movie script—rustic and sophisticate, oil man and grounds keeper, college drama instructor and high school majorette. Where else would a Houston dowager hold tightly to the muscular arm of a young six-foot-six horse wrangler from a girls' camp as they make their way to the dance floor to try a German *schottische*? Where would the son of a Leakey truck driver order a Bireley's orange for the daughter of a Dallas banker? Where would the female lead of "Finian's Rainbow"—the summer stock "Finian" showing nightly downriver at the Arts Foundation—slap her delectable thigh in such unrestrained laughter at the tales of a Rocksprings bachelor who raises Poland China hogs? Where, also, would a balding little man climb on a table top and do a prolonged headstand to the cheers and handclappings of the onlookers—or chin himself half a dozen times from an overhanging limb—and then, his Saturday night ritual over, grab the arm of a pretty woman forty years his junior and go strutting off to the dance floor to put-his-little-foot?

The peak time of Saturday night is from ten o'clock until one. The rodeo at the corral is generally over by ten, and the crowd and performers from it begin to drift in along with late-comers who first went to a show in town or a private party. Since the few tables under the oaks are always taken early, the overflow has to distribute itself about in little standing groups or on the narrow wooden benches scattered along the fence. The phalanx of young stags that rather loosely

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blocks one end of the dance floor early in the evening begins to drift solidly forward—like a school of curious fish intent on observing more closely a band of deep sea divers. And in the anonymity of the flowing, shifting crowd a highly reserved doctor from Kerrville may find himself throwing aloofness to the winds and dancing a loose-legged polka with his eleven-year-old daughter; or a hard-swallowing young camp counselor may finally approach the table of a tanned, beautiful woman twice his age—the mother of one of his “boys”—to ask her to dance and have her smile up at him with a very definite and pleased yes. It never seems to matter particularly who does what; it’s just accepted that you came to Crider’s to let your hair down.

But even if most people come to Crider’s to be in the big middle of things—the dancing, the jostling back and forth to reach tables or the beer counter, the laughing, the flirting—there are some who are content to remain outside and watch. They sit on the fenders of their cars, holding babies, smoking, chewing on matches. Primarily they are family folks who can’t afford a dollar for themselves and their kids so they come early and park along the fence and look. Now and then a few of the men will saunter down the line of cars to the outdoor beer counter and hunker outside the rim of bright lights. They exchange handshakes—the single, brief little respectful jerk of country and ranch people—and then join in with the gazing toward the noise and music and lights. Perhaps before long a barefooted boy will slide out of the darkness and stand next to his father—not saying anything at first, just watching and listening to the quiet steady talk of the men, then finally speaking down to his father: Mama wants you. The man nods and reaches a slow arm around the boy’s legs. He says, All right, run along; I’ll be there in a minute—and after a while he rises and nods toward the group and moves on back toward his car.

AS THE HOURS slip on by toward one o’clock and the cars begin to circle out of the big dusty parking area, one of the hill country’s un-

solved puzzles reoccurs. By all logic, the high-gearred, drink-laden drivers of so many fast-moving cars along such a narrow, twisting river road should provide tragic headlines each Sunday morning. Yet despite curves, beer, and one-arm-around-the-girl driving, the road in from Crider's has remained incredibly accident-free. It's as though some kind of special, pilot-light shrewdness remains lit even in the most bleary-eyed driver, saying, "Look, just keep your wits about you and you can make it—you got to be up here again next week, you know." And like a flock of tipsy homing pigeons the Crider's regulars race back through the darkness into town.

A HOLIDAY FEAST

WHEN I return home to central Texas during the Christmas season, I usually spend the first day just standing around in rooms. I peel tangerines while my mother talks about the hometown goings-on; I stare at the same family photographs I have been looking at in the bedroom for the past thirty years; I lean against the fireplace mantel and shell pecans. After dark I stand in the kitchen talking to my father, home from work at his feed store, and having perhaps my sixth or seventh cup of coffee of the day as I listen to my father's oftentold tales.

But on the second day I excuse myself from the house about noon and get into the car and take my traditional half-day drive: my simple-minded but satisfying tour through hills and trees and riverplaces. I prepare myself, of course: I select a paperback or two from the grocery bag of books I had put in the trunk for Christmas reading; I stop at a 7-Eleven for a Lone Star and some Fritos; and then I ease on down the road toward Medina—the first of the small hill country towns on my itinerary.

It is a rewarding thing to do, this slow driving along the highway.

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CRIDER'S

RODEO & DANCEHALL

Since 1925
The Oldest Dancehall and Rodeo In Texas!

Presents
A SESQUICENTENNIAL
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"From Then... To Now"

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Aug. 30, 1986

A PORTION OF THE PROCEEDS GO TO THE KERR CO. SESQUICENTENNIAL COMM.



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File: Hurt, Elaine Crider - Elaine Honored by Bank of the Hills



Walter Harrison Crider, (r), father of Elaine Crider Hurt and on the left, C. O. Merritt, her mother's brother.

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File: Hurt, Elaine Crider – Father and Uncle



**WEST KERR COUNTY
HALL OF FAME**

Walter & Audrey Crider

— 1991 —

PRESENTED BY

WEST KERR COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



**WEST KERR COUNTY
HALL OF FAME**

Elaine Hurt

— 1997 —

PRESENTED BY

WEST KERR COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Fellow Criders, let's resolve feud

To the Editor:

After reading the recent articles published in our local newspapers concerning the closing of Crider's, I'm a little confused.

As a bottom-of-the-totem-pole member of the Crider family, I wish someone from "up on top" would explain to me what this so-called "family feud" is all about. Money? Everyone has profited from Crider's in some way. Greed? That should be easy to equally resolve. Empathy? I for one still care. Yes, it is a shame that the building burned and the tree fell, but it is a tragedy that our family has lost sight of its love for each other.

Perhaps I'm a bit idealistic, Crider family, but let me share with you what I've taught my children (and students) for many years:

If you make a mess, clean it up.

Share what you have with others.

Play fair.

Say you're sorry if you hurt someone.

If you don't know what to do, ask for help.

The outer wrappings of Crider's are not important — it's the spirit of those who love it and each other that makes it shine. So how about it? Can't you all get together to resolve, rebuild and reunite?

*Sally West,
Hunt*

Kerrville Mountain Sun

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Ice fells Crider's 'Tree of Memories'

by Sara Hendricks

There will be no eulogizing for the majestic live oak out at Crider's Dance Hall and Rodeo but family opinions vary as to whether the tree can be saved or even whether the weekly summer dances will go on.

A large portion of the tree - at the dance place four miles west of Hunt - collapsed under the weight of ice during last Thursday's cold snap. The spirit and limbs of several lesser trees around Kerr County broke under the frigid weather but none were so popular as the tree that shaded the concrete dance floor of Walter and Audrey Crider.

The Criders have both passed away, but not before having their children promise to carry on the tradition of neighborly good clean fun. Unfortunately, the tree's plight may be just one more hitch in a family divisiveness that already made the future of the dances uncertain. Legal squabbling has placed

a wedge in a once close-knit family and, to some, the tree may be the last straw. Others insist the tree will be righted or other trees planted in its place and let the dances begin.

From the time in 1925 when Walter and Audrey Crider began inviting neighbors over for barbecues and dances and men showed their prowess by climbing on the backs of bucking, snorting bulls, the place has grown in popularity but has not been without its share of problems. Through devastation by flood of the original wooden dance floor, to the Depression, to a fire last March that destroyed the cafe and left the huge oak tree charred, the dances have gone on.

Wilton Crider - Walter and Audrey's boy - is uncertain about the future. Their daughter, Elaine Crider Hurt, is more optimistic.

"I have no idea," said

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Mary West, great-granddaughter of the original owners of Crider's Dance Hall and Rodeo, sits in the middle of the live oak that last Thursday collapsed under the weight of ice.

Tree

February 16, 1994 Ke

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Wilton Crider of the fate of the dances, adding that a decision will be made by the first part of May, the month the dances are scheduled to resume.

Monday he hadn't yet seen the tree. "It's not a pretty picture. I don't care about seeing it," he said.

"There's a lot of history there," Crider continued. "Not just for dancing. Chickens roosted in it, we had a hog pen under it, a swing in it. During the rodeos, goats were butchered on the one long limb.

"To me that tree was the most important part of it. It was like a big friend standing there ... It's probably the most loved tree in Texas."

Hurt didn't see the tree un-

til Saturday on a morning so sunny it was hard to remember the frigid temperatures just three days before.

Tears welling up in her eyes, she was trying to make the best of it by recalling the flood, the fire, hard times that didn't stop people from coming to Crider's.

"When we were little we had a swing on one of those limbs," Hurt said. She was picking at a sausage croissant and sipping coffee at The Store in Hunt, stalling for time before the short drive to the place where the tree lay in its undignified state among picnic tables that miraculously escaped damage.

"Presidents, politicians,

movie stars, football players, camp counselors, cowboys, electricians, grandparents and grandchildren, locals, a governor, college football coaches, high school students." In one long breath Hurt listed the people who have come to Crider's through the years to dance, rodeo and drink frosty beer or soda pop. "All the many people, the pleasure it has brought. Not many trees have had that opportunity, have they?"

"Friendship, loves affairs and general goodwill toward men have begun under that tree. There has been a depression and other hard times but it has continued to go on."

"Probably now I'd call it the tree of memories," Hurt

said before gathering up her granddaughter for the trek out winding Highway 39.

Danny Feller was the first to spot Hurt's car.

"It's part of a landmark that can't ever be replaced," said Feller, whose band played five or six summers at Crider's.

Fresh tire tracks crisscrossed the parking lot, an indication that several others had already paid their respects to the fallen tree.

Cynthia Westrum was one of them. Pointing at the long, curving bough still bandaged in burlap from its scorching last March, Westrum was one of the many children of the Hill Country who perched on

that limb while her parents two-stepped beneath it. The sight caused Westrum to wince.

"We were raised dancing on this floor. There are memories," she said. "Too many memories," a grown-up Westrum added with a secret smile as she headed back to a vanload of kids.

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Hill Country K.D.T. 2-22-94



Elaine Hurt and Jim Rediker look over the fallen Crider's tree, which fell victim to fire last spring and to ice this winter. (Times photo by Lanza Teague)

Fallen Crider's tree fights for survival

HUNT — After surviving many years of drought, Texas storms and a brush fire last spring, one of West Kerr County's favorite landmarks, the live oak tree that graced Crider's outdoor dance floor near Hunt, fell over during last week's ice storm.

According to Elaine Hurt, one of the four owners of Crider's, the tree had been an important part of Crider's history.

"Crider's opened in July of 1925 and since that time, the tree has been a part of its beauty and charm. After World War II, when the dance floor was moved from the river bank to the hilltop where the tree is, the tree became even more significant," Hurt said.

"One of the main attractions on the weekend was when Pappy Crate of Rio Vista Lodge would stand on his head on the tree limbs during the dances," Hurt added.

Hurt, who is the daughter of Walter and Audrey Crider, the founders of Crider's, said she is saddened by the loss of the tree.

"It's like losing a member of the family. When we were



Lanza Teague

West Kerr Correspondent

children, my brothers and sisters had a swing in that tree and chickens would roost in the branches. Ever since Crider's was founded, people would gather under the tree and visit, reminisce and some even fell in love there.

"When I look at the fallen tree, I feel like I'm at a funeral. I have many memories connected with it and it's always been a big part of Crider's. We could always plant another tree, but it just wouldn't be the same," Hurt said.

Hurt said that she hasn't given up completely on the tree and is consulting with local tree experts to find out if the tree can be saved.

Jim Rediker of Oak Tree Life in Kerrville says that there may be some hope for the tree. "The Crider Oak has been around for a very long time. I estimate the tree's age to be over 200 years old.

"Live oaks like this old tree are very resilient because of their deep roots. They have survived poor soil and weather conditions for years. This tree survived a big fire and has been doing everything it can to survive. It still shows signs of life now," he said.

Rediker added that even though there are signs of life, he is reluctant to get his hopes up. "It might be saved but it would take a highly skilled arborist and even then

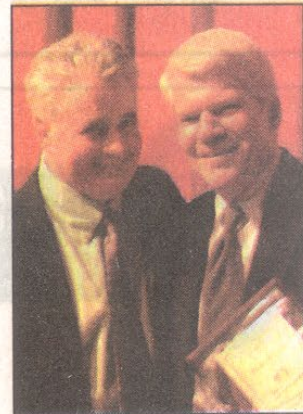
it's doubtful."

Hurt says she has the name of an arborist and will be contacting him within the next week.

West
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West Kerr Chamber honors four people

Schroeder named Citizen of Year; Rouse Educator of Year; Hurt, Schumacher honored for service



Chamber President Keith Asbury, left, congratulates Citizen of the Year Clint Schroeder.

Four citizens were honored at the West Kerr County Chamber of Commerce's 25th Anniversary Banquet Thursday night.

West Kerr Current Editor and Publisher Clint Schroeder was named Citizen of the Year, Hunt School Art Teacher Richard Rouse was honored as Educator of the Year and Sylvia Schumacher and Elaine Hurt were recognized for their past service to the chamber.

About 130 people attended the Feb. 24 banquet, held at the new Hill Country Opry and Grill.

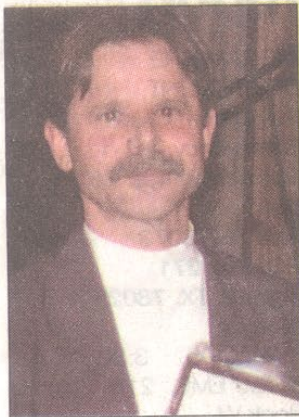
Chamber President Keith Asbury announced the Educator and Citizen of the Year Awards as well as lifetime service awards.

Introducing the citizen award, Asbury noted that Schroeder started the West Kerr Current newspaper "from scratch."

"He came to West Kerr County with an important

vision to start a newspaper that would bring people together and make them think."

He mentioned that Schroeder seeks to entertain, educate, and encourage a variety of viewpoints,



Hunt Art Teacher Richard Rouse was named Educator of the Year.

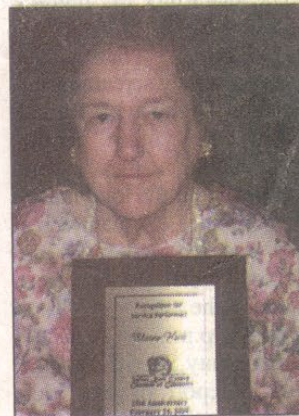
"including my own," Asbury noted.

Whether school functions, ribbon-cuttings, or pushing projects along, "such as the left turn to the Ingram Loop," Schroeder dedicates himself to bettering our community, he said.



Sylvia Schumacher was recognized for her service to the Chamber.

"It is fitting that as this citizen of the year he has been the ultimate cheerleader for our community of West Kerr County. He is a tremendous asset to our area. More than a cheerleader though, he is an outstanding leader who tirelessly promotes community



West Kerr Current photos

Elaine Hurt was honored for her service to the Chamber.

projects and to better the community through public works."

In accepting the award, Schroeder thanked the community for its reception of the paper and its many con-

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Chamber

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tributors to the paper, recognized staffers Susan Clark and Jennifer King and thanked his wife, Nancy.

"I know some of the people who have received this award in the past, and I'm honored to be in their company," he said. "Thank you."

In announcing the educator of the year award, Asbury said Rouse mentors and inspires children of all ages.

"In a time when so much emphasis is placed on the TAKS test, teachers who teach non academic courses seldom get much credit," Asbury said. "Our educator of the year is an art teacher, but he is so much more than that. He stimulates the creative instincts of his students by allowing them to explore multiple artistic media.

"Students who may be facing difficulties in academic areas bloom under his tutelage. It takes a special talent to take a group of 5-year-olds, turn them loose with paints or water colors and ~~actually~~ have them produce something. This teacher is able to do this on a regular basis with children of all ages.

"He also mentors older students, many of whom become artists themselves and return after they graduate and come back to thank him

and keep in touch."

Schumacher and Hurt received awards recognizing lifetime service to the chamber. Both were instrumental in nurturing the chamber in its earlier years.

Before the awards, banquet-goers were treated to steak or chicken dinners by candlelight and music.

Musical pair Brian & Melissa ("Patch") led the

evening with a well-performed set of familiar favorites. Following the duo, singer-songwriter Paul Tennison, accompanied by fiddle player Kimbeau Keating performed original music.

Lynette Pennell, of the Almost Patsy Cline Band and the Bandera Chamber of Commerce performed a song with Keating.

Kerrville Mountain Seen - March 17, 1993

Blaze at Crider's destroys heritage

Elaine Crider-Hurt says she is just sick, and upset, but mostly saddened by the fire which claimed Crider's Dancehall and Rodeo about 1:30 a.m. Monday.

The old dancehall was started by her parents in the early 1920's and is now owned by herself, her brother Wilton Crider and sister Laverne Moore of Medina, and Randy Crider from Austin.

"I've been around that dancehall nearly all my life," said Hurt. "Our parents worked real hard for us to have it."

Hurt said the family will probably rebuild, but would not know anything for sure until the family had a meeting to decide what to do next.

Crider's does not open un-

til May, and no one was hurt in the fire which leveled the entire concession and dance hall building.

Ingram Volunteer Fire Department Chief Bob Heiden said they were called by the sheriff's office to assist in the fire. The Hunt Fire Department volunteers were the first on the scene, however, Heiden said the building was likely already near the ground before even the Hunt firefighters arrived.

"It was a really old building with a lot of old, dry wood," said Heiden. "There was also a good wind that evening which contributed to the fast burn."

Heiden said the sheriff's office is expected to call in an arson investigator, but the

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Crider's _____

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actual cause of the fire has not been determined.

Heiden added that at this time last year, the Ingram Fire Department had six calls for fires, and the department has already had 17 calls so far this year.

A very big thanks!

Our heartfelt and sincere appreciation to the Hunt Volunteer Fire Department, the Ingram Volunteer Fire Department and neighbors for their efforts to save the tree and building at Crider's during our recent fire. Also, thanks to all the friends who have called and offered their love and support to us.

May God bless you. Your continuing support will be greatly appreciated, and we plan to reopen soon.

Elaine Crider Hurt
Aubrey Henderson

SUNDIAL

WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

TV Listings For The Week of May 19 through May 26

Crider's: Texas Tradition

by Michael Alexieff

There's a place in West Kerr County where tradition never dies. A place that seems like it has been there forever, and will be there forever. A place where 70-year-old grandmothers return to reminisce about their first kiss under the old oak tree.

This place lies dormant every winter, looking a little forlorn without its glorious green canopy. Maybe even a little lonely, waiting for the feet, infant to ancient, to once again slide across its worn concrete in step with those timeless Texas sounds.

But come spring, this year that is Saturday, May 20, Crider's comes to life. With dusk, the sun's golden light is replaced by yellow bulbs, and the throngs start to arrive. From children, to camp counselors, to local teens, to tourists, to your doctor and your lawyer, they all come out to sample this truly Texas tradition.

Crider's Rodeo and Dancehall has been happening every summer Saturday evening since 1925. Located just a few miles west of Hunt on Highway 39,

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The Crider clan, as they were in the mid-seventies, Elaine, Gene, Audrey, Wilton and Laverne. Audrey, wife of Crider's founder Walter, has since passed away. At right, summer visitors to the Hill Country have enjoyed the music and hospitality of Crider's for more than 60 years.



CRIDER'S

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the venerable institution has been written up in numerous books about Texas. And all these years, it has been run by the Crider family, with the third generation now helping out.

The family aspect is important, both for the Crider's and for those people who bring their children out to the dances. Elaine Hurt, daughter of Crider's founders Walter and Audrey Crider, said, "Our parents wanted to keep it in the family and as a place to take the children."

Many youngsters take their first "two-steps" at Crider's. "Lots of people learn to dance here," Elaine said. "I remember one night, the first number the band played the whole floor was just little kids."

Although the dance floor has been moved a few times, Crider's really hasn't changed all that much over the years. Walter and Audrey's four children, Elaine, Gene, Wilton

and Laverne, have kept changes to a minimum out of respect for their parents' wishes and also for their customers.

"We've tried to keep it much as it's always been," Elaine said. "People come back and say, 'I was here 30 years ago.'"

Elaine said that people enjoy coming back and finding Crider's hasn't changed. It gives them something permanent, something solid, in an ever-changing world. And if there's anything permanent about Crider's, it's the massive oak tree that dominates the west end of the dance floor. If a dancehall can have a heart, this tree is it.

Many a summer, and lifelong, romance has taken root under the tree, Elaine said. "That's where they fall in love," she said. "If that tree could talk, it could tell some good stories."

Crider's has had its fair share of characters. Harry "Pappy" Crate, who had a tourist place



This old oak tree dominates the west end of Crider's, and many a romance began under it.

near Camp Waltonian, was famous for entertaining the crowds by putting a beer can on a table and standing on his head on it. Crate, who was still going to Crider's at age 92, would entertain the kids with a hula hoop as he got older.

Rick Hurst, the actor who played Cletus on the Dukes of Hazzard, still comes to Crider's every summer.

Of course, in addition to the dancehall, there is the rodeo. Every Saturday evening the Aubrey Henderson Rodeo Co. produces an event which includes calf roping, bronc riding, bull riding, barrel racing, calf scramble and other activities.

Saturday night, May 20, the band will be the Texas Trail Dusters.

Elaine said that business is

healthy, and that with the support of her siblings and her son "Boo" Vlasek and her daughter Sally West, Crider's will be here for some time to come.

"Hopefully we have contributed a lot to the Hill Country," Elaine said. "We have a lot of pride in this area. We're proud of our heritage and proud to have the privilege of living here."

Crider's closing?

Mother Nature, family feud
may do in local landmark

6-8-94
K.P.T.

By Elizabeth Pavolini
Times Staff Writer

HUNT — A Hill Country summer institution for most of this century, Crider's Dance and Rodeo, may be a thing of the past.

For nearly seven decades, cowboys and cowgirls, families and friends have traveled down Texas 39, past the community of Hunt, to Crider's to enjoy a rodeo, live music, dancing and socializing.

But the Crider family, who own the establishment, have now come to a parting of the ways over the longtime tradition.

According to Wilton Crider, a "feud among the family" is the reason Crider's will not open its gates this year — the first time since the summer of 1928.

"I haven't gotten anything out of it for years, it's just been a free-ride for whoever was running it," Crider said Tuesday.

But Crider, who said he remembers the first Crider's rodeo and dance to benefit the Hunt school in the late 1920s, said he doesn't feel too bad about the imminent closing of the family operation.

"It's already burned and the

out of the place for me. It's not the same place anymore," he said. "I guess nothing is forever." A fire in April 1993 burned down the cafe at Crider's and severely damaged the landmark oak with its drooping limbs — a leaning post to generations of Crider's-goers.

However, Crider's sister Elaine Hurt and nephew Randy Crider are upset he is not doing more to save the place.

Randy Crider added that he thought several potential lessors had been discouraged from taking over the running of the place from the Criders because of the feuding amongst family members.

Elaine Hurt on Tuesday released a statement concerning the closing of Crider's:

"Due to circumstances beyond my control, I'm afraid the opening of Crider's this summer may be in jeopardy. My parents worked long and hard and had a lot of pride in its establishment. It was their wish this tradition continue for as long as possible," she said.

"I feel, if possible, we owe our community, camps, motels and hotels and people involved in rodeo this place to gather. I hope

By Donna Cromeans
Lifestyle Editor

HUNT—Hill country families can once again dance under the stars on Saturday night at Crider's Hall and Rodeo.

The family owned establishment has reopened, to the delight of its fans, following a March 16 fire which destroyed the cafe and severely damaged the stately oak that is a Crider's trademark.

"The fire was hard to accept," said Laverne Crider Moore, who along with her husband Bill Moore and Carl Voss will be operating the new concession stand.

"People couldn't believe someone would do that to the tree, but it's going to be okay we hope. We're working hard to get everything back like it was, we can't let it die."

Her brother Wilton Crider agrees. He remembers when Crider's first opened in the late 1920's. It cost gentlemen thirty-five cents to get in and ladies were admitted free.

But he thinks he knows what really brings people to Crider's.

"I think it's definitely the tree," he said.

Both he and his sister say that many a romance has been started under the tree on their dance hall.

Moore recalls a woman who came in and had to buy four T-shirts, because she and her husband met at Crider's and she wanted the shirts for them and their children as a remembrance.

The dance floor at Crider's is filled with memories of antics and dignitaries, but the one thing that has remained constant is keeping it a place to bring families.

Club manager John Singleton says, "We've always stressed behavior and we like to keep it where anybody can come and not feel like they're going to be insulted or embarrassed."

Rodeos take place at Crider's every Saturday night through Labor Day at 8 p.m. and are operated by the Aubrey Henderson Rodeo Company. Dances to country and western music start at 9 p.m., with admission to the dance just \$5.

Lifestyle

The Kerrville Daily Times June 13, 1993

Family works to keep tradition alive



Crider's dance benefits Chamber

"Boo" Vlasek and his mother, Elaine Hurt, donated their famous outdoor dance hall to benefit

the Citizens Chamber. Toni Ashwood and Eloise Roe, of the Chamber, worked at the gate.

Crider's Dance Hall won't open after all

7/6/94

by Sara Hendricks

Negotiations to get Crider's Dance Hall and Rodeo open for the 1994 summer season have reached an impasse and family members say the popular West Kerr County spot will stay closed.

Wilton Crider, eldest of the three surviving Crider children said he's tired of people blaming him for failed negotiations.

"I made them (other family members) a good deal and they wouldn't accept it," he said.

Elaine Crider Hurt, one of the family members Wilton referred to, said a mediator to renegotiate this year's lease was included in last year's

lease agreement.

"We had someone assigned a year ago in May to renegotiate a lease," Hurt said. "It was never done."

Wilton Crider said he was all for getting it open with two of his nieces running it but that Elaine threatened to have them arrested for trespassing a couple of weeks ago when the two women were at the Highway 39 spot cleaning up.

Kerr County sheriff's deputies were indeed called but no charges were filed.

Hurt admits having called sheriff's deputies but said trespassing was not the reason. She declined to elaborate.

Crider's rises from ashes to resume dance tradition

by Paul Prentiss

Things are pretty much okay in the Hill Country. Crider's Rodeo and Dancehall has reopened and the ol' oak tree is doing well after a March 15 fire put both futures in doubt.

This last Saturday afternoon Wilton Crider could be seen sweeping the dance floor under the giant oak that once shaded pig pens and served as a roost for chickens.

The band was warming up and hand printed concession signs were being put up as family members scurried around to have all things ready for the 7 p.m. gate opening.

Wilton Crider stopped his sweeping long enough to reminisce about other Crider's openings.

It all started as a fundraiser in 1925 that Walter and Audrey Crider agreed to host on their land four miles west of Hunt on Texas 39.

The party became an annual 4th of July celebration, and in the 1930s the popular gathering became a weekly affair during the summer months.

When he came back from serving in WWII, Wilton Crider decided to revive the Dancehall and Rodeo. It was at that time that the dancehall was placed under

the old family oak tree. It was originally on the lower bank of the Guadalupe River, and after a flood in the 1930s it was moved to high ground.

"I thought we would never get her open (in 1946). It was right after the war and we couldn't get material," said Crider, "It was almost the end of June before we opened."

That first reopening in 1946 had folks dancing on a wooden floor. The next year the cement floor was poured, giving people from all over the world a place to scuff their boots to fine country music under the Texas stars.

The gate opens at 7 p.m., the rodeo starts at 8 p.m., and the band starts playing at 9 p.m. every Saturday night.

Mountain Sun
7-9-93



The Crider clan took a break from their chores for a family portrait under the old oak tree at the dancehall. Pictured are from left Wilton Crider, D'Ann Singleton (daughter), John Singleton (son-in-law), "Big Bill" Moore (brother-in-law). Not pictured, but involved in the enterprise are "Little Bill" and Tracy Moore. Carl Voss and

The return of

K.D.T. Sunday
July 14, 1996

CRIDERS

New owners plan to reopen landmark

By Robert Klaus
Times Staff Writer

HUNT — Crider's is coming back.

Mark a big red circle on your calendar around this date: Saturday, July 27.

For those of you who just arrived on planet Earth from somewhere else, Crider's is the historic outdoor dance hall located on Texas 39 three miles west of the post office in Hunt.

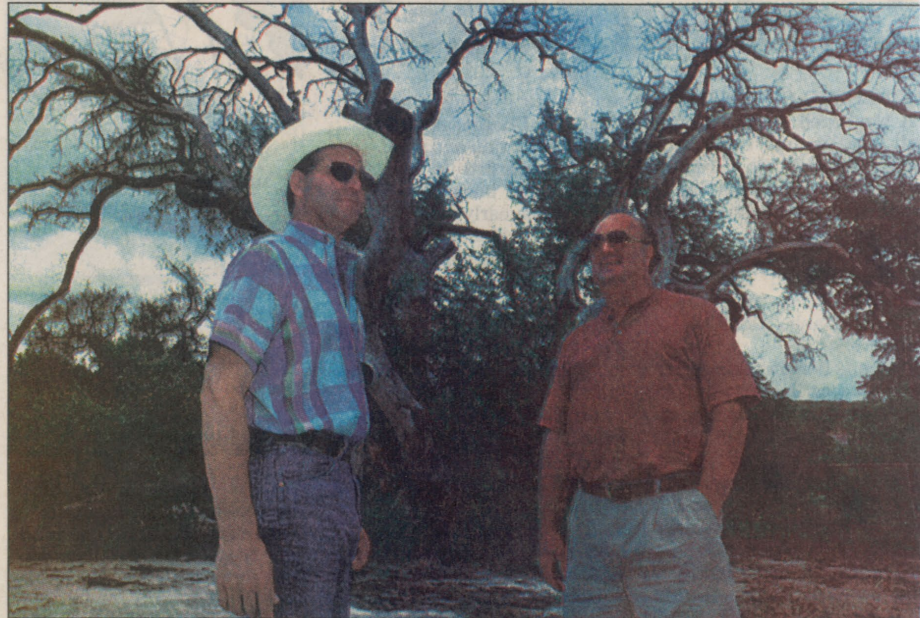
For nearly 70 years, Crider's was THE place to go for western entertainment — country and western music and dancing and a first-rate rodeo.

When it shuttered in March 1993, following a devastating fire that destroyed the dance hall and its support buildings and badly damaged the ancient live oak tree that shaded them, there was hardly a dry eye for hundreds of miles around.

Crider's was just simply the place you went for a barn-rattling, foot-stompin', western-style Saturday night, where a thousand romances blossomed and untold kisses stolen. A young couple named Lyndon and Lady Bird sat under the trees and enjoyed the music when they visited their daughters at a nearby summer camp.

It will be back that way, and right soon, according to Fred Minter, who recently purchased half ownership, complete with name, in the now-decrepit location from the Crider family, which had owned it since it opened in 1925. Members of the Crider family retain the other half ownership.

Back in those early days, admission for men was 35 cents; women were admitted free. Soft drinks — Coca Cola,



Above: With the historic Crider oak tree as a backdrop, Fred Minter, right, new co-owner of the fabled Crider dance hall, reviews plans with Aubrey Henderson, who will produce weekly, full-scale rodeos as part of the weekend entertainment package.

At left: Hal Robinson of Golden Eagle Landscape Co., right, describes his plan for salvaging the historic Crider oak to Minter, left, and Henderson. The tree, which by one estimate may be as much as 800 years old, was severely charred when the dance hall burned down in 1993 and then badly damaged by ice in a winter storm a year later. Robinson is optimistic he can save the tree. (Times photos by Ken Schmidt)

cream soda, strawberry, Orange Crush and Delaware Punch — were a nickel.

During prohibition, no alcoholic drinks were permitted inside the dance hall, but the law may have blinked when

eying the parking lot. It was said you could get moonshine for \$3 a gallon or 25 cents a shot. When beer became legal again, the price was 15 cents a bottle, two for a quarter.

The operation moved back

and forth across Texas 39 several times, depending on how many times the Guadalupe washed it out. It moved to the present location in 1949, which

See CRIDERS, 3A

Return of Criders - Pg 2 - 7-14-1996

Cridders

Continued from page 1A

was when the weekly rodeo was added.

Working with rodeo impresario Aubrey Henderson, Minter has vowed to have it back in operation — if not full operation — by the end of the month.

"I've already got the opening band booked," Minter said, "and we'll be serving food and drinks. We'll have just a temporary building, but over the winter we'll be putting in refinements, including a permanent building, a deck out to the Guadalupe River and such."

A Hunt resident, who with wife Marilyn operates the Casa Bonita Lodges, a resort just a mile or so east of Crider's, Minter said he has hired an Austin architectural firm to draw up plans for the new facility.

"But we're going to retain all the old charm and make it as much like the old Crider's as we can," he vowed.

Henderson, well-known for his "Showdeo" wild west shows as well as more conventional rodeos, plans to have the ring ready in time for a rodeo starting that night.

"We'll be running every night for the rest of the summer and on into September," Minter said.

More good news is that Minter is dedicated to saving the historic live oak tree and had Hal Robinson of Golden Eagle Landscape out to plan the salvage. Although it will take a while to restore the tree to its former prominence, the prognosis is very good.

Heavily burned in the 1993 fire that destroyed Crider's, the tree sustained further major damage almost a year to the day later when ice from a winter storm so heavily coated it that many of the major branches were snapped.

"I had one tree expert come out who estimated the age of the tree at about 800 years," Minter reported.

Just days from now, it will once again overshadow one of the area's premier entertainment centers and is likely to do so for many more years to come. Who knows — maybe that famous sign that spelled Crider's in rope lettering will be back over the entrance.

Oak restoration



K.D.T. **Monday**
July 22, 1996

Photo at left, a 100-foot crane and two dozen volunteers hoist giant limbs of the famed Crider's oak tree from their recumbent positions on the ground where they had lain for three years at Crider's Dancehall near Hunt. Photo above, volunteers move the limbs. The dancehall will be reopening on Saturday. (Times photos by Robert Klaus)



A RARE PHOTOGRAPH OF THE FIRST CRIDER'S DANCE FLOOR
...On The Banks Of The Guadalupe River

Crider's: A Hill Country Legend

Dancehall And Rodeo Started In Hunt In 1925 By Walter Crider Family

By **MICHAEL BOWLIN**
 Times Staff Writer

It started as a simple 4th of July fundraiser in 1925.

Walter and Audrey Crider agreed to host a rodeo on their land, four miles west of Hunt on Texas 39, to benefit the Hunt PTA.

A dance was held after the rodeo for guests from the nearby Heart of the Hills Inn as well as other short-term West Kerr County summer residents.

The idea caught on and a tradition — Crider's Dancehall and Rodeo — was born.

The next July 4th, guests of the Criders did the two-step, cotton-eyed Joe and shottische on a new wooden dance floor built by Walter Crider on the lower banks of the Guadalupe River.

By the early 1930s, the Crider get-togethers became so popular among Hill Country residents that the yearly rodeo and dance was turned into a weekly affair.

IN ABOUT 1935, after devastating floods washed away two different wooden dance floors, Walter Crider moved his dancehall across the highway next to his country store and Humble Gas Station.

In 1946, Crider again moved the establishment to the riverside of the highway, but during this move installed a permanent cement dance floor with a wooden stage at one end.

Soon after locating to this site, the Crider family also built a permanent rodeo arena, where every Saturday night, visitors could watch some of the best bull riding, bronc riding, calf roping, barrel

welcome to the HILL COUNTRY

July 26, 1987 Vol. 17 No. 38

William E. Dozier Jr.

Publisher

Michael Bowlin

Editor

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racing and calf scrambles in the Hill Country.

The following year, a concession area was added next to the dancehall and in 1948 the familiar wooden sign with rope lettering reading "Crider's" was installed.

OVER THE YEARS, Criders has entertained such celebrities as former University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal, the late President Lyndon Johnson, past and current Texas Governor Bill Clements, the Houston Oilers football team, 1950s movie queen Debra Paget, former congressman Tom Loeffler and several astronauts.

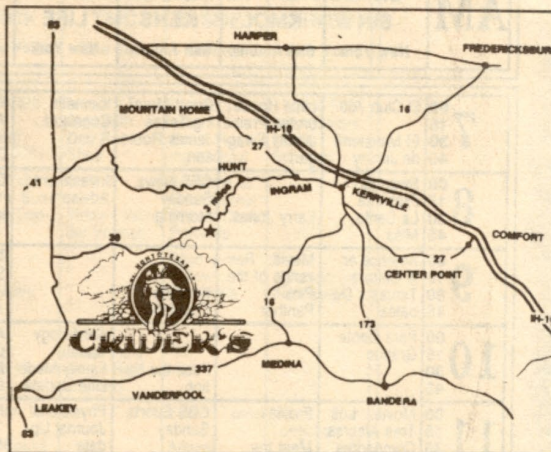
"We've also had thousands of camp counselors and high school students spend their Saturday night out here, as well as their parents, grandparents and teachers," said Elaine Crider Hurt.

Among the many entertainers to perform on Crider's stage are Phil Trimble, George Chambers, Jack Rich and the Continental Cowboys, Adolph Hofner and the Pearl Wranglers, Floyd Tillman, Leon Raush and country legend Willie Nelson.

When asked why Crider's has remained so popular over the last 60 years, Hurt said, "Because it's typically Texan."

"**THE CHARM OF CRIDER'S** lies in the unconscious mingling of people. You can find everyone from rustics, sophisticates, oil men, groundskeepers, high school students, teachers, professional football players, TV personalities, Presidents, Governors, astronauts, congressmen, the works out here on a Saturday night," added Hurt.

Not all that go to Crider's go to dance, Hurt said. "Some go to listen to the music, some just to watch the dancers, others, just go to have a good evening out with friends," Hurt said.



CRIDER'S DANCEHALL IS FOUR ...Miles West Of Hunt

ABOUT THE COVER: The familiar "Crider's" sign was designed by George Rees and Sug Anderson for the dancehall in 1948. It's made from a native cypress plank with rope lettering. Cover photo by Jody Rhoden.



BULL RIDING IS ONE OF MANY ...Events At Rodeo

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More than full house marks

By Bonnie Arnold
Staff Writer

Crider's Dancehall and Rodeo reopened Saturday with a more-than-full house and the proceeds from opening night going to the Hunt Fire Department.

County Judge Bob Denson estimated the crowd at about 3,000 people of all ages - a turnout evidenced by the overflow turned away at the gate after about 10:30 p.m. and standing outside the fence to listen to the music, and the cars towed away because they were blocking Texas 39.

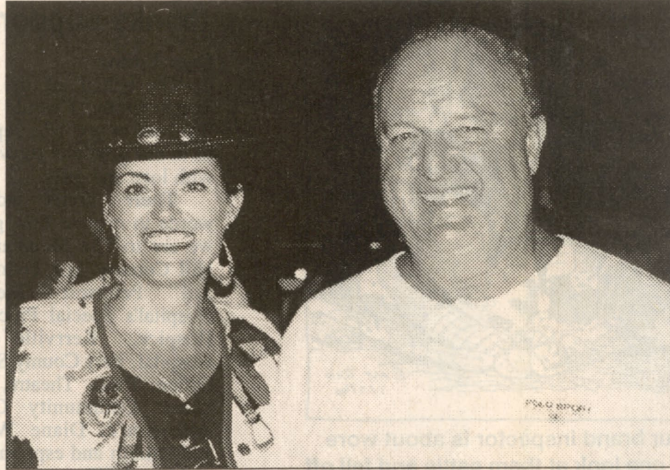
Fred and Marilyn Minter of Hunt, half-owners, were all smiles at the party, receiving the thanks and congratulations of many for getting the longtime traditional West Kerr nightspot open again after almost three years.

The old Crider's sign was back up over the gate - beside the new ticket booth - and the newly braced live oak tree was decorated with tiny white lights and white ribbons.

In attendance at the celebration were Boots Reese, Pat Smith of Corpus Christi, and Tiny Wisdom. Reese's mother-in-law Jean Reese made the Crider's sign in the 1940s and Jean's husband George used to call the square dances in the '50s, she said.

"We're the fifth generation of our family come to Crider's. The family had a place up here called Helter Skelter Shelter and we came here all the time," she said.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything! I live in Corpus and went to



FRED AND MARILYN MINTER of Hunt, half-owners of Crider's, were all smiles following the overflow crowds Saturday night. (Photo by Bonnie Arnold)

Waco, then here for this tonight. I've been coming here since the '50s and I've never been embarrassed here," Smith said. Wisdom said she started coming to Crider's 46 years ago.

Harry Gordon of Houston and Hunt attended the party with Susan Taylor, sister of Mrs. Neil Masterson of Hunt. "I've been coming here since before I was born," Gordon said, and remembered Life magazine including Crider's in a spread in the '40s called Life Goes to a Party.

Neil Masterson said he started coming to Crider's when he was eight years old, "50 years, anyway."

Evelyn Hickey of Hunt said she was brought to Crider's by her grand-

mother as child, gesturing down about knee high. "It's a family thing. I brought my own son when he was a baby and the infant seat was on the table in the middle of the beer bottles," she said.

That was the scene again Saturday as whole families came for the dancing, visiting and rodeo.

About 100 youngsters reportedly tried the calf scramble at Aubrey Henderson's Rodeo, and everyone who brought a horse got to be part of the rodeo's opening parade.

Parents and older brothers and sisters danced with smaller children as couples, young and young-at-heart, danced to music by Scott Randolph's

Crider's re-opening



A PAIR OF YOUNG LADIES find the excitement of Crider's reopening something to dance about. (Photo by Bonnie Arnold)

band, also returning to Crider's after a long absence.

The Hunt Fire Department benefited to the tune of more than \$5,000 as all Saturday night's proceeds will be pooled with future fire department fundraisers to buy a new brush truck for fighting pasture fires, said Dub Minter, treasurer.

He equated it to three of their usual

fundraisers per year, and expressed appreciation to the Minters (no relation, incidentally) for making it happen, and to the volunteers who kept the concession stand going until after 1 a.m. when they'd sold out of almost everything.

"I think it was great! I was about 13 when I learned to dance at Crider's and I'm 60 now."



PHOTO BY CLAIRE RABSON, KERRVILLE MOUNTAIN SUN

Dancers of all ages turned out for the July 27 dance when Crider's Open Air Dance Hall and Rodeo reopened.

Gotta keep dancin'

*Crider's Dance Hall
rises from the ashes
of the fire of '93*

BY KATHY LOWRY DEELY
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

When Kerr County's legendary dance hall and rodeo reopened last month, overjoyed revelers could have danced all night — and they did.

Set on a bluff along the Guadalupe River's south fork in the midst of the Hill Country's cluster of summer camps and river resorts, Crider's Open Air Dance Hall and Rodeo has been the most popular summer nightspot in the Kerrville area for five generations — a much-loved place where family fun isn't a theme-park promotion but a foregone conclusion.

In the spring of 1993, a mysterious, dead-of-night fire demolished Crider's and severely damaged the venerable live oak that had served as its centerpiece. For the past 2½ summers, as this cherished relic of bygone Texas lay in ruins, Crider's fans considered Saturday night the loneliest night of

the week.

No longer. On July 27, Crider's opened its doors and bull chutes again. All it took was some inspired interference.

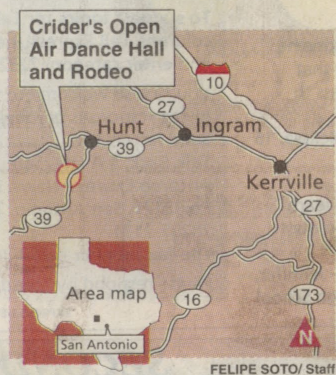
Fred Minter — a native Oklahoman and financier who lives in the area and owns Casa Bonita, a resort three miles east of Crider's — got tired of explaining to one crestfallen visitor after another why Crider's had not been

Hill Country Journal

rebuilt and reopened after all this time. It was a complicated story.

Most people agreed that, as one local wag put it, "That fire was caused, one way or another, by family friction." Locals weren't surprised when the long-standing Crider family feud erupted into outright hostility in the fire's aftermath, as accusations ricocheted back and forth, lawsuits were filed and injunctions issued.

■ See CRIDER/9G



Friday, August 30, 1996

San Antonio Express-News

SA life

Crider tree back up, crowd back dancing

■ Continued from 1G

People were baffled, though, by the family's refusal to sell or lease the place to a neutral outside party, denying themselves the impressive income Crider's had provided for decades.

To break the impasse, Minter came up with a two-pronged strategy.

"Rather than deal with feuding factions, I found myself a Crider nephew who hated 'em all," he explained, with the glee of a man who thinks he has pulled off the Hill Country deal of the century.

"I called this nephew up and explained to him that if his family couldn't finally get it together to reopen the place themselves or let someone else do it, I was going to build a rodeo and dance hall myself, on the vacant land across the highway from Casa Bonita. What's more, I told him, I was gonna name the place Critters — but spell it C-R-I-D-D-E-R'S!"

The nephew eventually capitulated, and Elaine Crider Hurt, who manages West Kerr County's Chamber of Commerce, did likewise.

"I really agonized about it," she says now, "because I felt like I was betraying the family by letting Crider's go out of our control."

But after much soul-searching, she decided she owed an even greater debt to another family — the family of man, especially her Hill Country neighbors whose love for Crider's made it effectively part of the public domain.

Minter, who now owns a 50 percent share of Crider's, managed in a matter of weeks not only to put the place back into operating condition, but to attempt to salvage an innocent victim of this interfami-

lial war. The victim was the 800-year-old tree that not only was badly scorched by the fire, but also partly uprooted when an ice storm sent it crashing, its massive boughs sprawled across Crider's dance slab.

The Sunday before Crider's grand reopening, more than 100 locals, including some volunteer workers, held something you don't see every day, or even every lifetime: an old-fashioned, neighbor-helping-neighbor tree-raising.

A few days earlier, tree expert Hal Robinson of Golden Eagle Landscapes had flooded the cavernous base of the four-trunked tree with 16,000 gallons of water to make the drought-parched tangle of roots, many reaching down to the river 50 feet below, more pliable.

Minter rented a 65-ton crane and a front-end loader, the only expenses incurred in a rescue mission that bore no guarantee of success.

One lifeless trunk did have to be amputated; it was cut into logs and sliced into memorial plaques. But the rest of the tree, though bald in spots, had continued to bloom each spring despite its prostrate position. It remained alive, if not well.

The orange crane gingerly lifted up one giant limb at a time, inching it slowly heavenward with the help of a chain-and-rubber gurney attached to the crane's enormous hook. As the scoop of the front-end loader supported the tip of each giant bough at the proper angle, sweating laborers created custom-size metal support posts, hauling pipes off a flatbed truck and cutting them to size.

Scrambling up an extension ladder and mounting each limb to place the sling in position, rodeo



PHOTO BY PATRICK DEELY

Crider's Open Air Dance Hall and Rodeo drew thousands to the re-opening night dance in July. Raising the downed oak tree (right) with crane, slings and custom crutches was a dramatic event for Kerr County residents.

impresario Aubrey Henderson was the hero of the day.

After the final branch was lifted into place and the fourth metal crutch wedged beneath it, the crowd fell silent as they watched the gurney — now its sole support from above — being carefully unhooked and removed. When nothing — even the spectators' cautious optimism — came crashing back to earth, they burst into cheers.

By 7 p.m. July 27, the bleachers were filled at the Crider's rodeo arena, and the parking lot was so jam-packed that pickups and Suburbans were parked along the highway. More than 3,000 revelers descended on the spot from every part of the state.

But before the barrel racing, the calf scrambling and clowning, before a sweet-singing cowgirl on horseback serenaded the crowd, the emcee gave a prayer of thanks for Crider's rebirth.

Then it was mass rejoicing at Crider's Dance Hall when Scott Randolph's White Lightning Band struck up around 8 p.m. with the heel-kicking sounds of revved-up country music. On the newly refinished dance floor, Crider veterans joined hands with tripping toddlers to dance beneath the stars the way they used to. Only this time, along with the traditional "Cotton-eyed Joe," the crowd also giggled and jiggled together in a spirited rendition of the Macarena. By 9:30, the dance slab was so crowded that sheriff's deputies had to turn away the long line of late-comers waiting outside.

Minter, his wife, Marilyn, and Elaine Crider Hurt were the inaugural hosts, while volunteers manning the makeshift plywood concession stand sold more than 250 cases of beer and twice as many sodas. The proceeds — more than \$5,000 — would be donated by Minter to the Hunt Fire Department, an



PHOTO BY BONNIE ARNOLD

act of generosity and maybe, someone joked, a form of fire insurance.

Except for one car accident on Highway 39 that created a Hill Country first — three miles of gridlock traffic — there were no injuries.

"We only had one fistfight, one theft (a camera) and one bigoted racial incident," Minter reported. "You'd think this was Woodstock instead of a good old-

fashioned fightin' and dancin' club!"

By next spring, he promised, there will be two levels of wooden decks along the river bank and a brand-new cafe. Minter also plans to add hard liquor and margaritas to Crider's traditional but limited liquid menu of beer and jug wine.

To Crider's fans, it still seems too good to be true. Crider's is back again, as great as ever — or even better.

KPTimes 8/13/96

Letters to the editor

West Kerr chamber extends thanks

To the Editor:

At this time I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the people that helped the West Kerr County Chamber of Commerce during the past few months with our projects.

In May we honored the honor students from the schools in West Kerr County, with a picnic at Camp Arrowhead. Thanks to Camp Arrowhead, Bernhards, HEB, Mike Yates, Janet Robinson, Jack Clarke and Bill Ragsdale. The students had a great time.

The Camp Appreciation Dinner was very successful. We always appreciate the Kerrville Area Chamber of Commerce for joining us in this event. Thanks to Mt. Wesley Conference Center for being the host. Also, thanks to River Inn, W. R. Records, Security State Bank, T. J. Moore Lum-

ber Yard, Averys, Casa Bonita, Water St. Antiques, Nations-Bank, Norwest Bank, Golden Eagle Landscape and the Kerr County Ambassadors. We like to show our appreciation to the camping industry for its great contribution to our area.

A special thank you to Virginia Ruth Clarke and Pat Nelson for helping make our Arts Trail in July very successful. We appreciate all of the artists and other people for helping with this art trail.

A big thanks and appreciation to the Schreiner Family at the YO Ranch for being so helpful with our YO Picnic. The food cooked by Jack Clarke and his crew was delicious. Also our appreciation to Carolyn Rothwell, Cow Creek Pottery, Wild Goose, River Inn, Lazy Hills Guest Ranch, Hill Country Budweiser, Camp Arrowhead, Details and Mail, Bill's Bar B Q. The Kitchen Sink, Casa Bonita, Guadalupe Gallery, T. J. Moore Lumber Yard, Guadalupe Forge, CW Steak House, Adena Glass, Gallops on the River and all the other people that helped make this fundraiser a huge success. Most of all, we are proud of the people in West Kerr County for helping to keep it beautiful and maintain the high quality of life.

We must strive to keep it this way.

Let's all pray for rain.

Elaine Hurt,
Ingram

Hill Country

September 1, 1991

TELEVISION

Kerrville, Ingram & Fredericksburg

The Crider's tradition



Crider's waltzes on

Outdoor dancehall unique, yet 'typically' Texan

Story by
MICHAEL BOWLIN

Under the stars, cowboys and their sweethearts, little kids and white-haired grandparents slide across the sawdust-sprinkled concrete in time to the music.

No one's self-conscious at Crider's. Folks are here to have a good time and it doesn't matter if you don't know the latest step.

Crider's, Texas' oldest dancehall and rodeo, will wind down its 66th season on Sept. 20 and 21 with a tribute to "old time" cowboys.

On that weekend, cowboys 35 years and older, from across Texas and Oklahoma, will compete in an "Oldtimers Rodeo" at the famed Kerr County arena and dancehall a few miles west of Hunt.

"Y'all come," said Crider's spokesman Elaine Crider Hurt. "This will be the last dance and rodeo of the season so we want everybody to help us celebrate another successful season."

Hurt has been involved in the family dancehall, in one way or another, all of her life.

For nearly seven decades, people keep coming back to the landmark entertainment complex, "because it's a good, clean place to have fun," Hurt said.

"That hasn't changed in all the years it's been open. It's one of those places a whole family can come and have a good time. Also, it's typically Texan," she said.

Crider's started in 1925 as a simple 4th of July fundraiser for the Hunt School PTA hosted by Walter and Audrey Crider.

Guests staying at the nearby Heart of the Hills Inn and out-of-county people who had summer homes along the Guadalupe River heard about the benefit and urged the Criders to build a permanent place where they could learn all the western dances.

By the following summer, Walter Crider had built a wooden dance floor on the lower bank of the river and a tradition was born.

In the early 1930s, the rodeo and dance became a weekly event during the summer.

When Crider's began, admission for the men was 35 cents, ladies were admitted free. Soft drinks were 5 cents a bottle with the favorites being Coca Cola, cream soda, stawberry, Orange Crush and Delaware Punch.

In the early years of the outdoor dancehall, bands played for \$25 a night as real-life cowboys competed with city slickers to dance with the pretty girls.

During prohibition, no alcoholic

beverages were allowed inside the dance hall. However, outside, in the parking lot or down the road, bootleggers peddled moonshine for 25 cents a shot or \$3 a gallon. Some of the moonshine was put in bottles and the stopper was a twisted piece of cloth, oldtimers recall.

When beer sales became legal, it was 15 cents a bottle or two bottles for a quarter.

Crider's has moved back and forth across Highway 39 a couple of times, its location flowing with the floodwaters as the Guadalupe indulged in its almost-annual rampage.

In 1946, Crider's moved for the final time, across the road to the riverside site it now occupies. Also that year, the Crider family added a permanent rodeo arena.

Later, an enclosed concession area and cafe came along and in 1948, the now-familiar wooden sign with "Crider's" in rope lettering went up at the entrance.

Big names in country music have played Crider's during the last six decades, including George Chambers, Country Music Hall of Famer Floyd Tillman, Leon Rausch and "The Red-Headed Stranger" himself, Willie Nelson.

And Crider's has seen just as many celebrities the other side of the bandstand. Presidents, astronauts, movie stars and football hall of fam-



CRIDER'S CELEBRITIES ON BOTH SIDES OF STAGE
...Willie Nelson on bandstand; LBJ in audience

ers have gotten their hands stamped with the throngs who line up at the gate every summer Saturday night.

The late President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird sat under the ancient Spanish oak trees and enjoyed the music when they brought their daughters to Camp Mystic.

These days, the bands are mainly regional pickers with headliners for special weekends. As a nod to modern times, there are video games and pool tables inside for the non-dancers.

What hasn't changed is the crowded parking lot and the line to

get in and the cool river breeze that makes you reach for a sweater.

The food's good, the beer is cold and the people-watching may be the best in Texas.

ABOUT THE COVER:

Elaine Crider Hurt says the the famous outdoor dancehall attracts people "because it's a good, clean place to have fun."

Hill Country Television 9-1-91



CRIDER'S, TEXAS' OLDEST DANCEHALL AND RODEO WINDS DOWN 66TH SEASON
... "Oldtimers Rodeo" Sept. 20-21 features cowboys 35 years old and up

Crider

From Page 1

volunteered to pick for me at the Folklife Festival in San Antonio, until one of them showed me how to do this open key playing," said Crider. This one guy was telling me I wouldn't be able to pick very good with my fingers all broken, but I told him I couldn't pick very good to begin with, so it wouldn't hurt a thing."

While Crider does not read music, he can certainly make music and has written a number of songs including one about Willie Nelson and the IRS blues, the Guadalupe River, Saddam Hussein and Clayton Williams when he was running for governor.

"When he got so rude to Ann, (Governor Ann Richards) I had to drop out," said Crider.

Crider has no favorite politicians and has more than a few words to say about the state of the union.

However, he does have some favorite musical artists, with Bob Wills and Tommy Duncan singing for him listed among the top.

"I grew up with that kind of music," said Crider, "but I like the big band music, too. I like to dance to it, and I even like the rock and roll to some extent. But that heavy metal stuff turns me off. I don't like anything that gets in my hearing aid and just thumps around."

Crider said he has always admired Rodgers and remembers, as a boy, when Rodgers built his house on

some property here and called it Yodeler's Paradise.

"He just yodeled so pure, but he had tuberculosis and didn't rest and take care of himself like he should have," said Crider. "I don't believe there'll ever be a blue yodeler to match him."

According to Crider, Rodgers spent a lot of time in Mississippi where he picked up the blues, "except that he yodeled them."

Crider said he and his wife, Bobbie Nell, attend a lot of functions and go dancing as often as they can now that their children are grown.

"She's a great dancer," said Crider, "and a great cook and housekeeper. I sometimes thought she was too over-protective of the kids, kind of like a game hen with only one chick, but they all turned out just fine."

Crider, now 72, will be entertaining along with storytellers, cowboy poets and other pickers and singers including Buck Ramsey, Dusty Britches, Maggie Montgomery, Rusty Cox, Becky Petterson, Stewart Crawford, cowboy poet C.J. Berkman, Russell Rogers, Roy Harper and Don Hedgpeth.

"I'll say this about the occasion at the museum and Jimmie Rodgers day," said Crider. "People who care anything at all about music are missing a treat by not coming. I know hard times are on us, and it has to affect the money we spend, but it's money well-spent."



Wilton Crider, from left to right, Joan Crider Decker, D'Ann Crider Singleton, and John Singleton stand next to the sign of their dance hall and rodeo. The tradition of family entertainment continues at the Hunt landmark. (Times photo by Ken Schmidt)

September 9, 1992

TV listings for week of Sept. 10 through Sept. 16

Crider readies his old-timey music for 11th Jimmie Rodgers Festival

by Rhea Douville

Wilton Crider said he's "about half cowboy anyway" and is looking forward to paying 'tribute to the cowboy' at the Sept. 18 gathering at the Cowboy Artists of America Museum.

Crider is one of several entertainers who will be performing for the kick off to the 11th Annual Music Festival and Tribute to Jimmie Rodgers the following weekend at Schreiner College.

"I've always been a fan of Jimmie Rodgers," said Crider, "and I yodel some and sing a few cowboy songs. They started this Jimmie Rodgers tribute over at the old depot. I showed up, and somehow I got involved, and I've been there every year since."

Crider was reared in Hunt, where his folks began the famed Crider's Rodeo at their ranch on the Fourth of July.

"My folks raised a lot of goats," said Crider. "I think I've chased more goats over more of these hills than any man living."

When Crider came back from World War II in 1950, he and his brother started the Crider Rodeo again on Saturday nights, but they eventually leased it out as they got more involved in other things.

Crider bought his own ranch, near Medina, and has been there ever since.

"Ranching is all I've ever



Wilton Crider will sing at "cowboy tribute."

known," he said. "I didn't even start playing guitar until I was 55 years old."

Crider plays a guitar with softer nylon strings now, and has learned to play open key, since his fingers were broken and crushed between two pieces of iron when he was working on a tractor.

"These guys had

See Crider, Page 3

Crider's dance hall winds up season

Rodeo, tribute to 'old-time' cowboys scheduled for this weekend

Associated Press

HUNT — Under the stars, cowboys and their sweethearts, children and white-haired grandparents slide across the sawdust-sprinkled concrete in time to the music.

No one's self-conscious at Crider's. Folks are here to have a good time, and it doesn't matter if you don't know the latest step.

Crider's, Texas' oldest dance hall and rodeo, will wind down its 66th season Friday and Saturday with a tribute to "old-time" cowboys.

Cowboys 35 and older, from across Texas and Oklahoma, will compete in an "Oldtimers Rodeo" at the famed Kerr County arena and dance hall a few miles west of Hunt.

"Y'all come," Crider's spokeswoman Elaine Crider Hurt said. "This will be the last dance and rodeo of the season so we want everybody to help us celebrate another successful season."

"It's one of those places a family can come and have a good time."

— spokeswoman Elaine Crider Hurt

Hurt has been involved in the family dance hall, in one way or another, all her life.

For nearly seven decades, people keep coming back to the landmark entertainment complex "because it's a good, clean place to have fun," Hurt said.

"That hasn't changed in all the years it's been open. It's one of those places a family can come and have a good time. Also, it's typically Texan."

Crider's started in 1925 as a simple Fourth of July fund-raiser for the Hunt School PTA hosted by Walter and Audrey Crider.

Guests staying at the nearby Heart of Hills Inn and out-of-county people who had summer homes along the Guadalupe River heard about the benefit and urged the Criders to build a permanent place where they could learn all the western dances.

By the following summer, Walter Crider had built a wooden dance floor on the lower bank of the river and a tradition was born.

In the early 1930s, the rodeo and dance became a weekly event during the summer.

When Crider's began, admission for the men was 35 cents; women were admitted free. Soft drinks were 5 cents a bottle with the favorites being Coca Cola, cream soda, strawberry, Orange Crush and Delaware Punch.

In the early years of the outdoor dance hall, bands played for \$25 a night as real-life cowboys competed with city slickers to dance with the pretty girls.

During Prohibition, no alcoholic beverages were allowed inside the dance hall. However, outside, in the parking lot or down the road, bootleggers peddled moonshine for 25 cents a shot or \$3 a gallon. Some of the moonshine was put in bottles, and the stopper was a twisted piece of cloth, oldtimers recall.

When beer sales became legal, it was 15 cents a bottle or two bottles for a quarter.

Crider's has moved back and forth across Highway 39 a couple of times, its location flowing with the floodwaters as the Guadalupe indulged in its almost-annual rampage.

In 1946, Crider's moved for the final time,

across the road to the riverside site it now occupies. Also that year, the Crider family added a permanent rodeo arena.

Later, an enclosed concession area and cafe came along and in 1948, the now-familiar wooden sign with "Crider's" in rope lettering went up at the entrance.

Big names in country music have played Crider's during the past six decades, including George Chambers, Country Music Hall of Famer Floyd Tillman, Leon Rausch and "The Red-Headed Stranger" himself, Willie Nelson.

And Crider's has seen just as many celebrities the other side of the bandstand. Presidents, astronauts, movie stars and football hall of famers have gotten their hands stamped with the throngs who line up at the gate every Saturday night.

President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird sat under the ancient Spanish oak trees and enjoyed the music when they brought their daughters to Camp Mystic.

These days, the bands are mainly regional pickers with headliners for special weekends. As a nod to modern times, there are video games and pool tables inside for the non-dancers.

What hasn't changed is the crowded parking lot and the line to get in and the cool river breeze that makes you reach for a sweater.

The food's good, the beer is cold and the people-watching may be the best in Texas.



Elaine Hurt

Elaine Hurt is no stranger to anyone in this community.

Her hard work in promoting West Kerr County has been awarded many times over.

Elaine's family history can be traced back to the early settlers of this county when her grandparents settled the area. She has lived here all of her life and is very proud of her history.

"If my grandparents thought it was special enough to settle and make their family, I think it is special too and want to help promote the area," Elaine says.

She recently was informed that her efforts in obtaining a historical marker for the Hunt School were successful.

Elaine was involved directly in helping get the historical murals placed on Moore's Lumberyard in Ingram.

She works at the West Kerr County Chamber of Commerce

and is a member of the Hunt Garden Club, Hunt Methodist Church, a former member of the Hill Country Arts Foundation Auxiliary and many other organizations. She said she has had to slow down a little because of her work schedule at the chamber office.

Elaine Crider Hurt has worked for many years to keep the historic Crider's Rodeo and Dance open. Her efforts were halted, though, when the historic entertainment hot spot burned.

It is because of Elaine and others like her that our beauty and history of the Hill Country and West Kerr County will be preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Nominated by Walter Hailey

CRIDERS

BY PAPPY CRATE - NONAGENARIAN
SUBJECT TO CHANGES, FOR THIS IS HOW
HE REMEMBERS IT:

WALTER CRIDER MARRIED MISS AUDREY
MERRITT x THEY OWNED A RANCH
ON THE UPPER WATERS OF THE
GUADALUPE RIVER ABOUT 82 MILES
WEST OF SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS x
THEY OPENED A DANCE PAVILION OR FLOOR
IN 1925, THE SAME YEAR MY WIFE
WILLA ^{AND I} OPENED OUR RIO VISTA LODGE
FOR VACATIONISTS x

THE FIRST DANCE FLOOR, ON THE BANK
OF THE RIVER, CONSISTED OF WOOD BOARDS x
THE BOARDS DID NOT BUT, BUT HAD SPACES
BETWEEN THEM x I SUPPOSE TO ALLOW THE
RAIN WATER TO DRAIN x WOMEN WITH SPOOL
HEELED SHOES WOULD SOMETIMES GET THEM
CAUGHT IN THESE CRACKS x YOU CAN IMAGINE
THEIR DILEMMA WHEN THIS OCCURED x

AT A LATER DATE A LARGER OPEN AIR
DANCE FLOOR WAS MADE OF CONCRETE,
ALSO ON THE RIVER BANK x THIS OPEN
AIR FLOOR IS STILL USED TO-DAY x
AS THE NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS INCREASED, MORE
TABLES AND BENCHES WERE ADDED TO
ACCOMMODATE THEM x

PAGE 2

THE SEASON USUALLY RAN FROM THE LATTER PART OF MAY THRU LABOR DAY x THE BIG NITE, OF COURSE, WAS SATURDAY NITE x

NOT ALL WHO GO TO CRIDERS, DANCE x SOME GO TO HEAR THE MUSIC, WATCH THE DANCERS, OR JUST HAVE AN EVENING OUT WITH FRIENDS x MANY NEW ACQUAINTANCES ARE MADE AT CRIDERS x SOME LIVING IN THE SAME CITY, EVEN IN THE SAME BLOCK, MEET FOR THE FIRST TIME x

THERE IS A RODEO NEAR BY FROM 8 TO 9 PM AND THE DANCE FOLLOWS FROM 9 PM TO 1 AM x WHEN CRIDERS FIRST STARTED, THE ADMISSION CHARGE FOR THE DANCE WAS 35 CENTS FOR GENTS AND LADIES FREE x TO-DAY INFLATION HAS OVERTAKEN THEM, THE SAME AS YOU AND I, SO THE CHARGE IS \$2.50 WITH CHILDREN UNDER 12 FREE x

CRIDERS IS ENCLOSED BY A HIGH WIRE FENCE ; ONLY ONE GATE WHERE YOU COME IN AND GO OUT x YOU COULD COME IN IF YOU PAID x AFTER YOU PAID, YOU COULD GO OUT, AND RETURN, BECAUSE YOU WERE BRANDED ON THE BACK OF YOUR HAND x IN THE EARLY YEARS THERE WAS A LINE GOING OUT AND ANOTHER

YOU SAY: "I CAN UNDERSTAND THE "COMING"
BUT WHY THE "GOING"? SIMPLE ENOUGH;
"WHEN YOU GOTTA GO YOU GOTTA GO"

NO REST ROOMS BACK THERE THEN X

PLENTY OF TREES AND BUSHES X

THE THING WE HAD TO BE CAREFUL OF
WAS TURNING ON OUR CAR LIGHTS;

PRETTY EMBARRASSING AT TIMES X

OTHERS IN THE GOING OUT LINE WERE
GOING TO THEIR CARS TO GET A "SHORT" X

LIGUOR WAS NOT PERMITTED INSIDE X

IF YOU GO TO CRIDERS TO-DAY YOU ARE

PROVIDED WITH TWO NECESSARY ROOMS-

ONE FOR THE BOYS; ONE FOR THE GIRLS X

ALSO YOU CAN NOW BRING YOUR LIGUOR

TO YOUR TABLE X

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS WALTER AND
AUDREY'S SON WILTON AND HIS WIFE

BOBBY NELL, HAVE OPERATED CRIDERS X

WILTON MARRIED MISS BOBBY NELL NANNY X

THEY WENT TOGETHER FOR FIVE YEARS X

SHE SAYS IT TOOK HER FIVE YEARS TO

GET HIM TO SAY "YES" X

IF YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN WILTON AND BOBBY NELL

DANCE THE "COTTON EYED JOE" YOU HAVE REALLY

MISSED A TREAT X

THEY DID THIS DANCE AT THE SHAMROCK HOTEL IN HOUSTON, TEXAS, AND AGAIN, I BELIEVE, AT THE CITY AUDITORIUM X THIS DANCE WAS DONE BY COUPLES ONLY ORIGINALLY X NOT IN LONG LINES LINKED TOGETHER, AS IT IS DANCED TO-DAY; ENTIRELY DIFFERENT MOVEMENTS X

HOW CAN I DESCRIBE CRIDERS ?
LET'S SAY IT'S TRADITIONAL; SEEMS LIKE IT HAS ALWAYS EXISTED AND WILL ALWAYS EXIST X NO CASTE SYSTEM THERE X A LADY MILLIONAIRE, IN HER FINERY AND SPARKLING WITH DIAMONDS DANCES WITH A COW PUNCHER, WHO HAS JUST COME FROM THE RODEO AND SMELLING OF HORSE SWEAT X ALL AGES FROM TWO TO THREE YEAR YOUNGSTERS TO GRANDPAS AND GRANDMAS X EVERYONE THERE TO LET DOWN THEIR HAIR FOR FUN, AND FUN THEY HAVE X A GROUP OF OUR LODGE GUESTS WOULD RESERVE A TABLE ON SATURDAY NITES . AND, OF COURSE, TAKE ALONG OUR FAVORITE DRINKS X TO-DAY, WITH THE LARGER CROWDS, THEY DON'T RESERVE TABLES X ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO DO SO X

PAGE 5

TO-DAY THE SATURDAY NITE CROWD IS ESTIMATED AT ~~BE~~ AROUND 1500 TO 1800 X 3000 ~~&~~ CANS OF BEER ARE CONSUMED AND SOME 500 SOFT DRINKS X FIGHTS? I ONLY MISSED ONE SATURDAY NITE THIS PAST SUMMER, AND I DID NOT SEE ONE FIGHT X

I LEARNED THAT, IF YOU ACT IN A GENTLEMANLY MANNER, WITHOUT TOO MANY BEERS UNDER YOUR BELT, SOME MEN WILL LOAN YOU THEIR WIFE TO DANCE WITH X THIS SOMETIMES IS A GOOD IDEA BECAUSE IT GIVES THE HUSBAND A CHANCE TO DANCE WITH THAT FEMALE SITTING AT THE NEXT TABLE WHO HAS BEEN RAISING HER EYEBROWS AT HIM X

HE EVEN WISHES THAT GUY AND HIS WIFE WOULD DANCE A COUPLE MORE SETS X

IS \$2.50 EXORBITANT? WAIT JUST A COTTON-PICKING MINUTE X

4 HOURS EQUALS 240 MINUTES X

WHO COULD PASS UP A CHANCE TO HOLD A BUXOM BLOND - IF YOU CATCH ONE - IN YOUR ARMS FOR 1¢ A MINUTE? X

PAGE 6

I FORGOT TO SAY, AT THE BEGINNING
OF MY STORY - CRIDER'S CATTLE BRAND -
AS I REMEMBER IT - IS SHAPED LIKE THIS:

W FOR WALTER
A FOR AUDREY, HIS WIFE

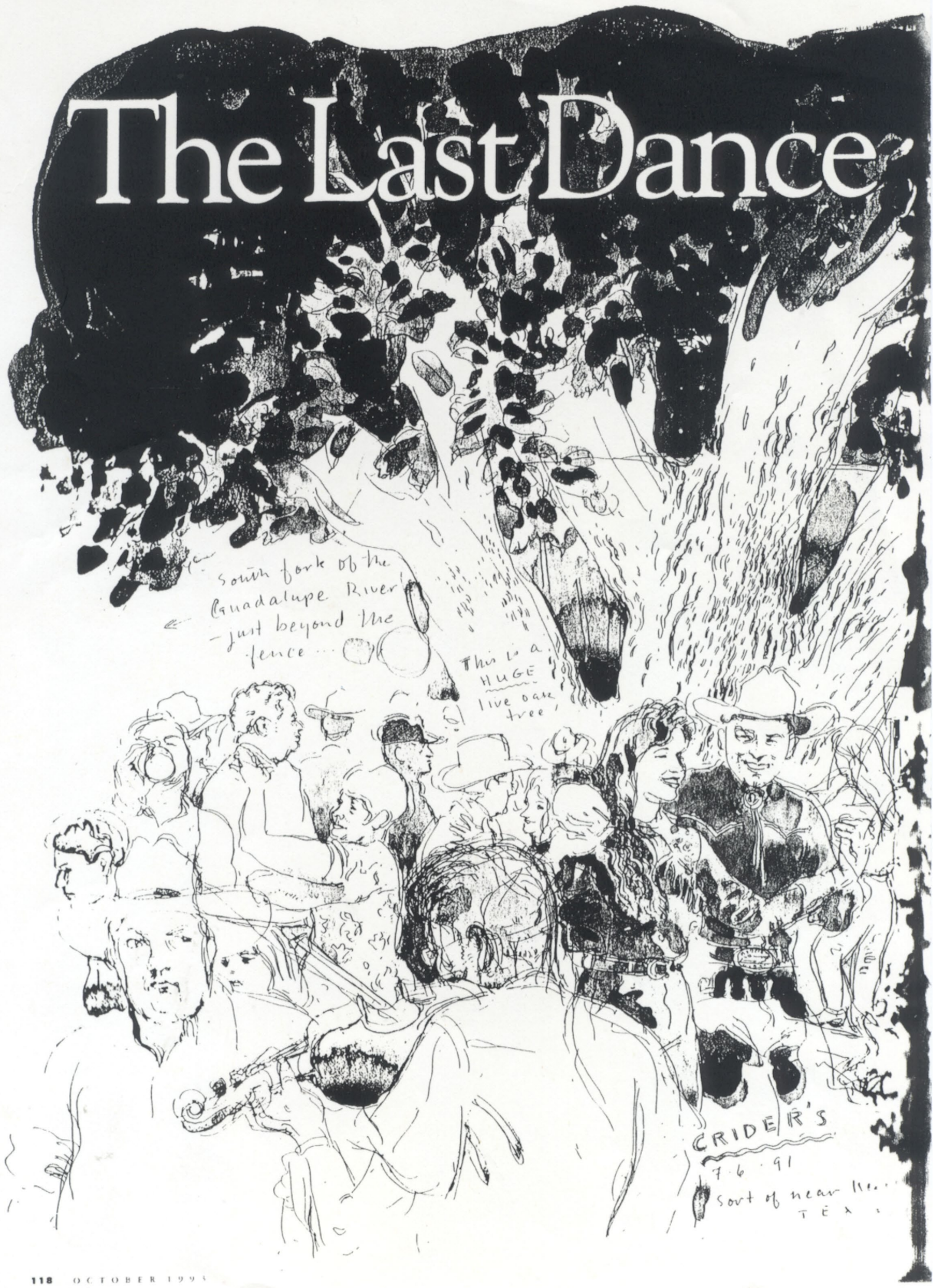
WHILE THE ORCHESTRA IS SETTING-UP
AND TESTING JUST BEFORE 9 PM,
WILTON APPEARS SPREADING SEVERAL
POUNDS OF CORNMEAL ON THE DANCE FLOOR X
THEN A BUNCH OF KIDS RUN AND SLIDE
ON THE MEAL X WHEN IT RAINS WE
DANCE ON CORNMEAL MUSH X

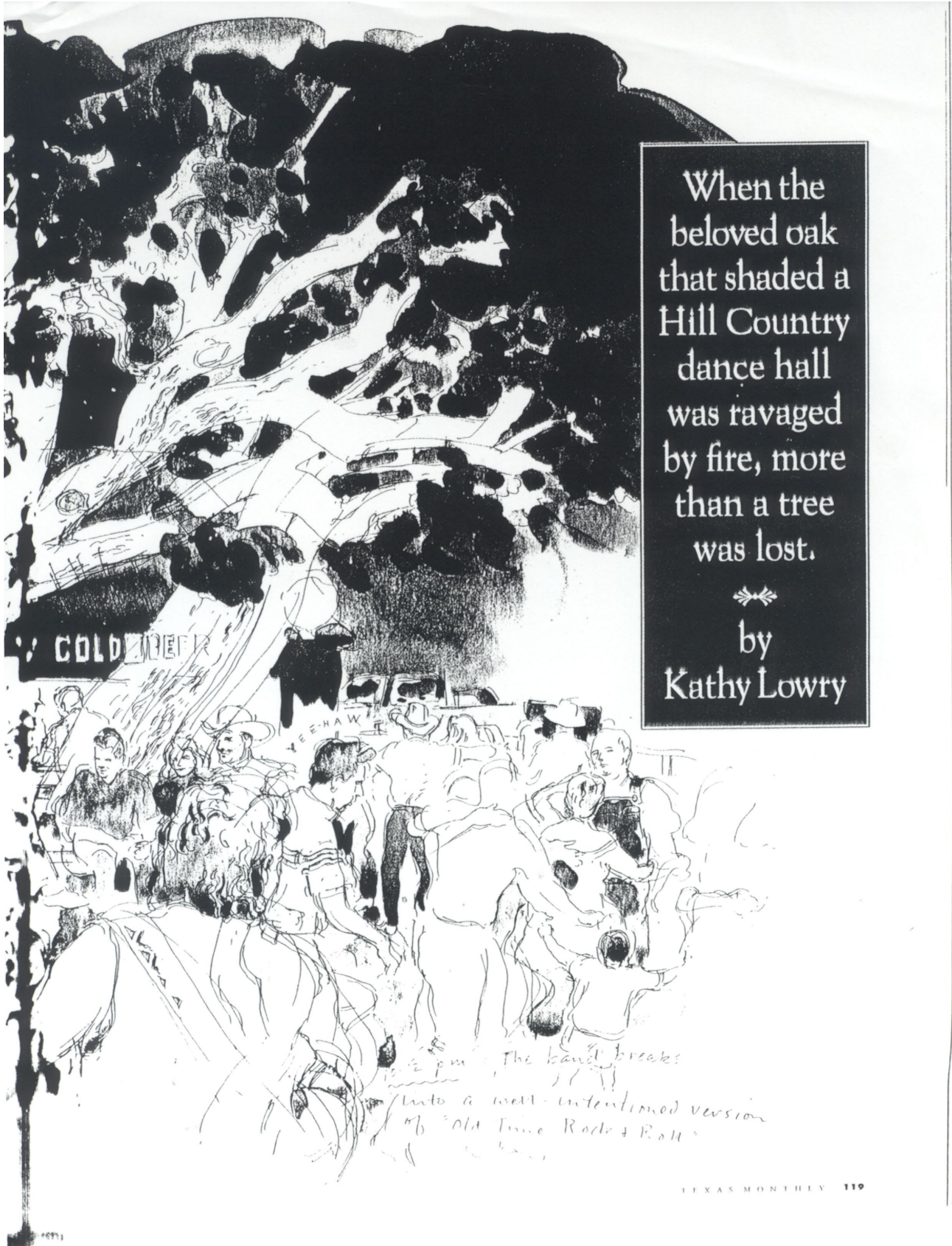
MUSIC: THE ORCHESTRAS COME FROM
SAN ANTONIO AND OTHER TOWNS X
THE MUSIC IS ELECTRIFIED X IT HAS
TO BE LOUD TO BE HEARD IN THE
OPEN BY HUNDREDS OF DANCING COUPLES X

IN CONCLUSION I WISH TO SAY
THAT MY ASSOCIATION WITH THE
CRIDER FAMILY THESE PAST 54
YEARS, HAS BEEN A HAPPY ONE X
THERE ARE NO BLOOD TIES, BUT A
FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIP X

Signed: Harry E. (Pappy) Crate
This, the 24th of October, 1979.

The Last Dance





When the beloved oak that shaded a Hill Country dance hall was ravaged by fire, more than a tree was lost.

❖❖

by
Kathy Lowry

*The band breaks
into a well-intentioned version
of "Old Time Rock & Roll"*

B

efore the big fire last March, it would have been hard to find a more authentic cultural artifact of bygone Texas than Crider's Hill Country dance hall. Located on the south fork of the Guadalupe River twenty miles west of Kerrville, Crider's was a magnet in the middle of nowhere. Every summer Saturday night, starting around eight o'clock, a crowd of campers, locals, cowpokes, cedar choppers, summering city folk, and

tourists migrated to Crider's to see a rodeo, dance, drink beer, and eat burgers at family-size picnic tables. They paid a \$5 cover charge for a kind of good clean fun as quaintly anachronistic as Crider's itself. On those balmy, breezy evenings under halogen-bright stars, corny country and western bands twanged out tunes like Crider's unofficial anthem, "Faded Love." Toddlers frolicked at the dancers' feet, and frosty-haired couples glided across the open-air concrete floor in forever-married sync. The place seemed as enchanted in its own way as the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Crider's opened in the mid-twenties, and the first dance floor, made of cypress planks, was down by the river. It stayed there until frequent flooding dictated a move to higher ground, across Texas Highway 39 next to Crider's country store. In 1946 dancers moved to the present location on a bluff fifty feet above the original site. Over the years the dance hall became an eternal verity of sorts for my baby boom generation, and nothing about the place seemed more eternal than the enormous live oak that grew practically in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by concrete. With a hundred-foot spread, the tree's generous canopy shaded the adjacent cafe as well as half of the basketball court-size dance slab. But the thing that made the tree so special wasn't its strength or size; it was its user-friendly accessibility. Five massive boughs sprang out like a fountain before sweeping down nearly parallel to the ground at head-bumping height, providing a natural jungle gym for kids, a courting ground for flirtatious teenagers, and a handy support for winded adults to lean against while having yet another beer before tackling the next Texas two-step.

The power of rejuvenation seemed to be among the tree's many charms. Well into his eighties, Crider's regular Harry Crate was famed for performing gymnastic feats using the tree and beer cans as props. If the tree made the old young again, it could also make the young older, or at least wiser. One twilight evening last summer, a bright-eyed two-year-old boy was playing horsey on a low-slung limb when he was smitten by a pixie in pink gingham. Leaning toward her, he gazed into her eyes with such unblinking intensity that she finally cried out for her mother. The tree had given them both a preview of yet another eternal verity.

Like the river below and the stars above, the welcoming oak seemed part of the public domain. We all had personal bonds to that tree, and the thousands who made Crider's a summer Saturday night tradition assumed the oak would be part of Crider's forever, for each successive generation to enjoy as much as we had.

We were wrong.

At one-thirty in the morning on an unseasonably cold and blustery March 15, Crider's caught fire, its ancient walls

burning as rapidly as seasoned firewood. In minutes the snapping power lines caused sparks to ricochet wildly from one part of the tree to another, as clumps of leaves flared up like Roman candles, lending a terrible beauty to their own immolation. The volunteer fire department was just four miles away, but by the time the firefighters were awakened and mobilized, the cafe was nearly gone, and half of Crider's once-mighty oak had been scorched a sickening black.

Except in the local Kerrville paper, the demise of Crider's did not make headlines. Like many others, I found out about it the hard way, when I drove past the cafe a few weeks later while visiting the Hill Country from San Antonio. I pulled into the parking lot, too stunned to keep driving. A nearby resident told me that for weeks after the fire, he saw other motorists sitting motionless in their cars and pickups, trying simultaneously to comprehend the devastation and pay their last respects.

I had been on my way to see friends at their weekend house, which they call the World's End Ranch, but the scene at Crider's fit that name far better. A mist fell as buzzards circled slowly overhead, and the silence was broken only by the sounds of the river rushing far below and the tires shushing on the rain-slick highway.

Finally I stepped out of my car to view the remains. The ramshackle wooden cafe and pool hall had been reduced to a rectangular heap of charcoal briquettes, bordered on that bleak day by an endless yellow ribbon cautioning: "Fire Line Do Not Cross Fire Line Do Not Cross Fire Line Do Not Cross."

The tree looked half dead. The limbs facing the cafe were badly charred, but the other side was strangely unscathed, except that the once-supple green leaves were now brown and brittle. Scattered among the ruins were dented metal cabinets and a blackened ice machine. The only objects still intact were the concrete tubs that had once held iced-down beer and soda pop. Off to one side were several curled and twisted strips that looked like giant pieces of burnt bacon. I puzzled over them for many minutes before I realized they were all that remained of the building's metal roof.

At first, everyone thought the blaze had been caused inadvertently, perhaps by someone who had taken refuge in the building that chilly night and built a small fire to keep warm. From the beginning, though, the Kerr

County sheriff's department investigated the fire as possible arson because the cafe was still closed for the winter and the electricity and gas were cut off. The department has found no evidence of arson, however. All the Crider family members have been asked to take lie detector tests; all have agreed, and so far those who have been tested have passed.

The decline
of Crider's
oak reminds
us that
nothing is
immutable,
nothing is
safe. We are
mourning a
collective
loss of
innocence.



The remains of
CRIDER'S 4.25.92

For weeks no one knew whether Crider's would ever open again. Then the owners hauled off the charred lumber and set about putting up a makeshift building so that the summer season would not be lost. Crider's cafe is once again open for business, partly new but hardly improved. In place of the old cafe, a plywood open-air concession stand dispenses beer and soda, sausages on a stick, and hot dogs—but the old menu of burgers, nachos, and fries is gone. And the magical oak that radiated strength shows unmistakable signs of decline. Two limbs of one major branch have been sawed off, and a low wooden fence has been erected around the tree's multiple trunks to protect it and keep well-wishers at a distance.

The oak's likely demise is hard to absorb. Like everything about Crider's, the tree brought out the best in human nature, serving as common ground for the cross-section of humanity who coalesced, for the duration of those summer nights, into one big extended family. It made us more expansive, more serene, more benevolent. It bridged social and generational gaps, as everyone from oil tycoons to gas station attendants, from toddlers to octogenarians, rubbed elbows and linked arms, sliding on the cornmeal that substituted for sawdust, kicking up their Justin'd, Reebok'd, and Cole Haan'd heels. So pure at heart was Crider's that when the sound system cranked out the chorus to the cotton-eyed Joe, everyone obeyed the owners' prohibition against shouting the traditional refrain, "Bullshit!"

No one pretends we've lost a historical monument. Crider's oak didn't play a role in Texas history, as did Austin's poor poisoned Treaty Oak. But it did figure in each patron's personal

history. In the case of my husband and me, it wielded a life-changing influence. After agonizing for years over whether to have a child, we watched one night at Crider's as new parents held their babies in their arms and twirled under the oak's sheltering boughs. Once we saw their radiant faces, we needed no other impetus.

Now my own child is three, and the dying oak has touched his life too. When he learned that he could no longer climb the tree and sit on its limbs, his eyes filled with tears. Tentatively, he reached up to touch the lowest bough. With its burlap wrappings, it looked like a wounded arm swathed in a gauze bandage. But *why* was there a fire, he kept asking, voicing the question we adults were too resigned and tempered by life to ask. Something that had once held him up had let him down.

The decline of Crider's oak reminds us that nothing is immutable, nothing is safe. Before the fire, this serene slice of the Hill Country seemed removed from the darker forces of modern life. Not too many years ago this part of Texas was so secure that customers routinely let their sleepy children bed down, unwatched, in the back seats of their parked cars. No one would risk that today. As we grow into middle age and beyond, the ravaged oak seems to remind us how the world has changed, and we with it. Over and above our private reasons, we are mourning a collective loss of innocence and the optimism that goes along with it. We'll miss Crider's oak as long as we've known it—all our lives. ♦

Kathy Lowry is a freelance writer who lives in San Antonio.