SPECIAL ISSUE

Our National Parks

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The TRAVEL MAGAZINE *of* TEXAS *** FEBRUARY 2016

BIG BEND's Amazing Stargazing

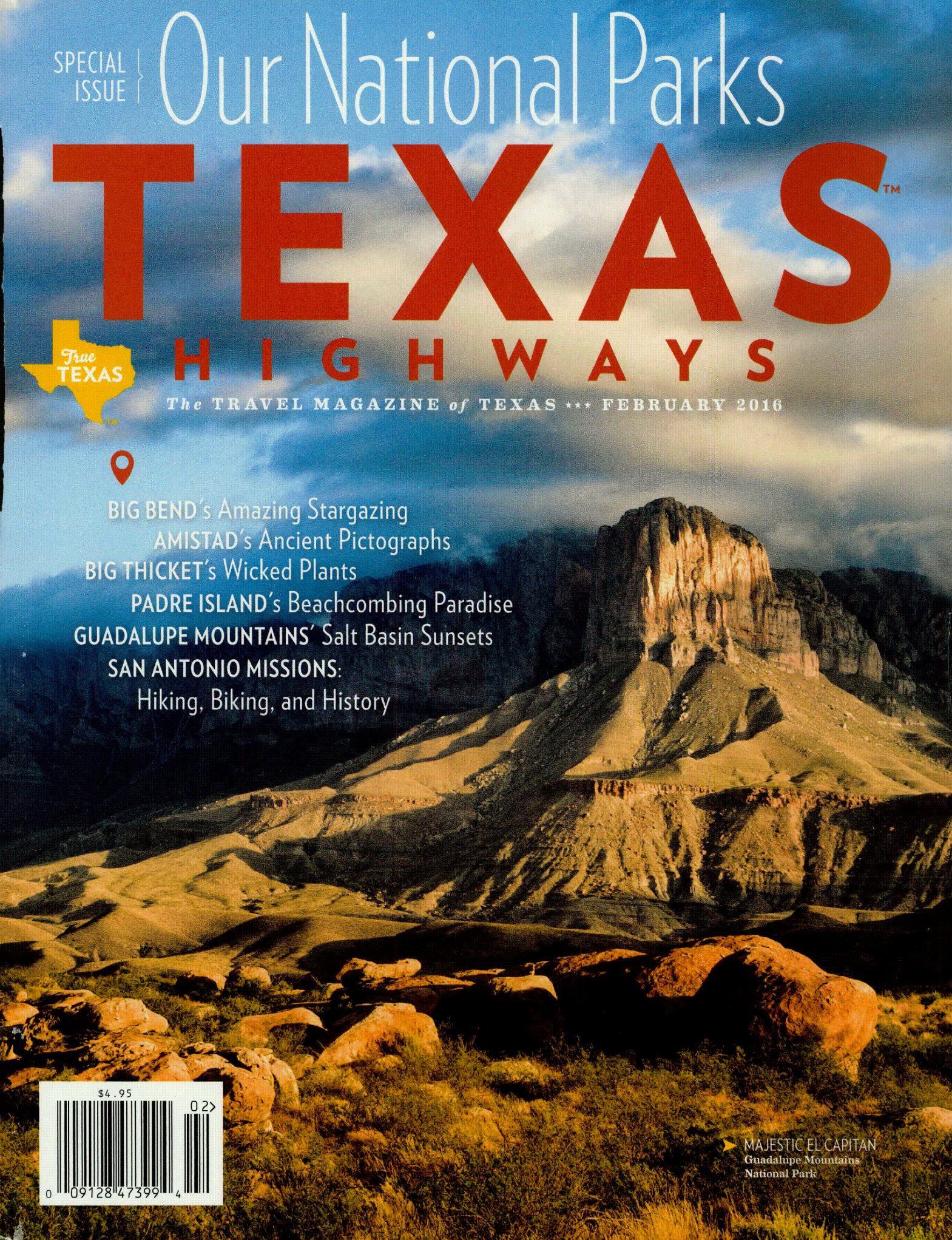
AMISTAD's Ancient Pictographs

BIG THICKET's Wicked Plants

PADRE ISLAND's Beachcombing Paradise

GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS' Salt Basin Sunsets

SAN ANTONIO MISSIONS: Hiking, Biking, and History



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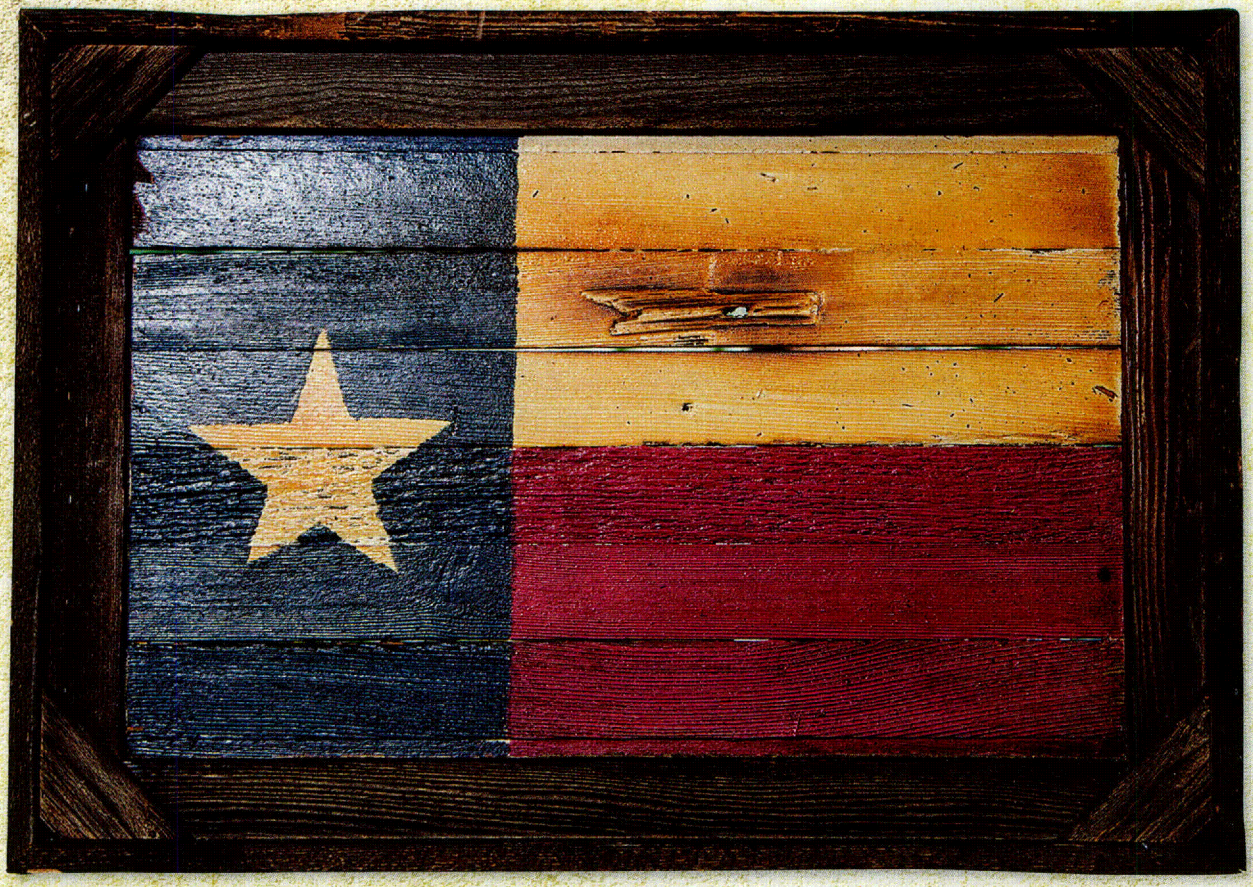

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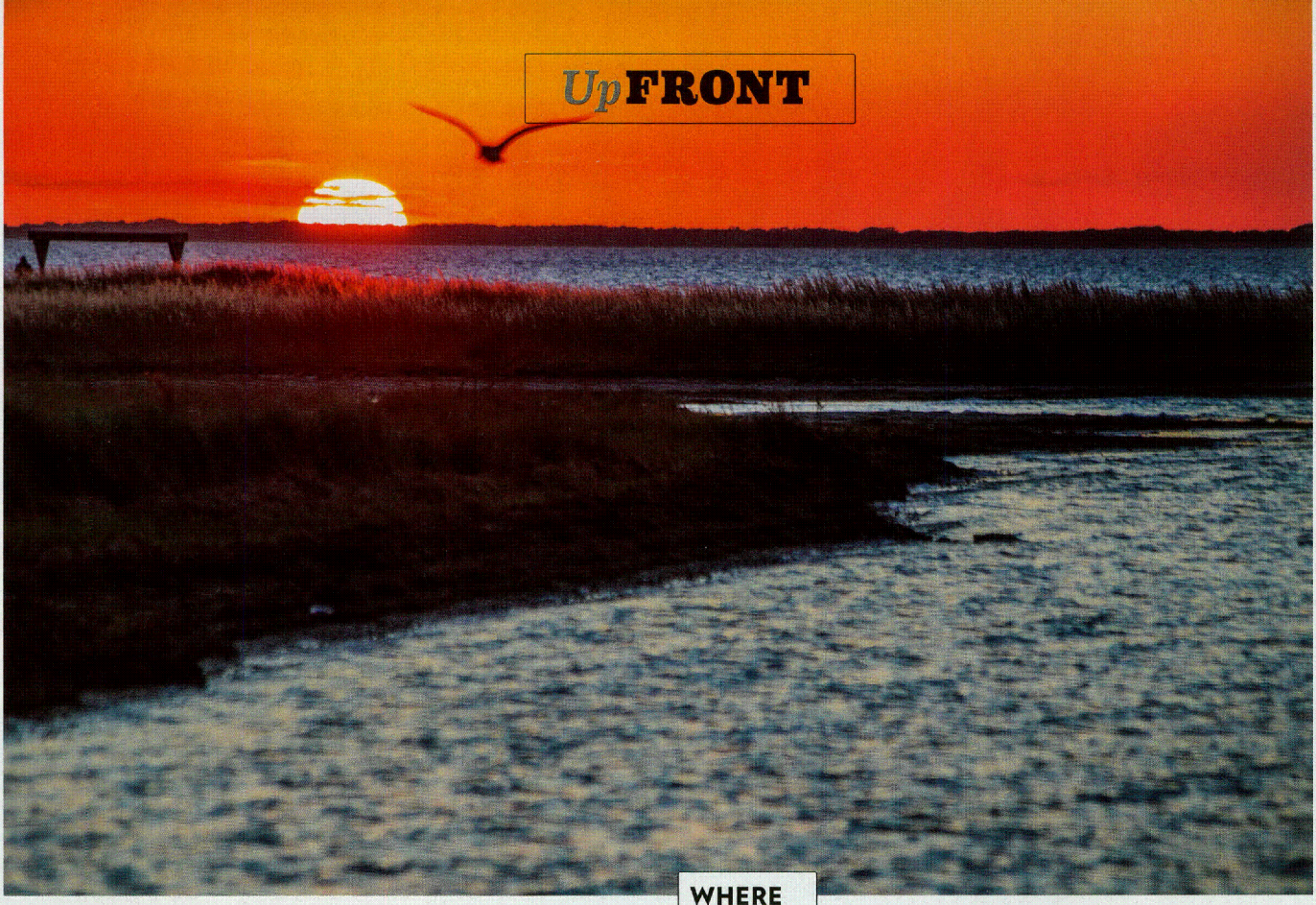

National Treasures

In 1916, World War I raged on, John D. Rockefeller reportedly became the first billionaire, newsman Walter Cronkite was born, and Charlie Chaplin signed a contract with Mutual Film Corporation. And in August of that year, the Woodrow Wilson Administration established the National Park Service to protect America's 35 national parks and monuments to date, and others yet to come.

Texas' first national park—Big Bend—came into being some 30 years later. Fast forward to 2016, and the NPS now oversees 14 sites and two trails in the state, including national parks, historic sites, recreation areas, a wild and scenic river, and a national seashore. This month, we salute the NPS centennial and that bounty of national treasures, from the Big Bend and the Big Thicket, to Alibates flint quarries and Waco mammoths, Chamizal and El Camino Real de los Tejas, and Palo Alto Battlefield and LBJ country.

"We want to focus on the fact that there are great resources in Texas and you don't have to load the station wagon and drive to Grand Canyon," says Courtney Lyons-Garcia, a Texas centennial organizer and executive director of the Big Bend Conservancy. So in the spirit of Texas' park prosperity, *TH* Social Media Manager Lois Rodriguez asked our Facebook followers to tell us about their favorite national parks.

Many respondents described the "trip of a lifetime" at majestic Big Bend and Guadalupe Mountains national parks (Wölfli Imhof from Switzerland likes our mountain-desert terrain). Kaye Richardson Hobson was among those moved by the San Antonio missions—San José in particular. And applauding Padre Island National Seashore (above), Deborah McKinney says it's her "favorite place for relaxation and solitude. A must every single summer. I hear it calling me."

Let's all answer the call of our national parks this year.

Jill Lawless, Editor

WHERE WE'LL BE NEXT MONTH:

We'll road-trip scenic Texas 16 from San Saba to Graham, sample cinnamon-y Manske Rolls in San Marcos, and ride the trail north to the Goodnight Historical Center. Also in the lineup: adventures in Waco; Culinary Nights at the Witte Museum; and embroidered Western wear from Fort Lonesome. And do you know the state amphibian? Find our state symbols in the next issue, too.

WHERE TO FIND US

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PHOTO: Padre Island National Seashore, Will van Overbeek

VOLUME 63 / NUMBER 2

FEBRUARY 2016

The **PEOPLE**, *the* **PLACES**, *and* **WIDE-OPEN SPACES** *of* Texas

OUR NATIONAL PARKS
Celebration

38 ***The Story of Our National Parks***
From the establishment of Big Bend National Park in 1935 to Waco Mammoth National Monument in 2015, the National Park Service has had a hand in preserving and showcasing a diverse sample of Texas' greatest natural and cultural resources.

Text by **MATT JOYCE**

50 ***National Park Perks***
Many of the 16 National Park Service sites across Texas are celebrating the system's centennial year in 2016 with special activities, including tree plantings at Big Thicket and the opening of a new Fossil Discovery Exhibit at Big Bend.

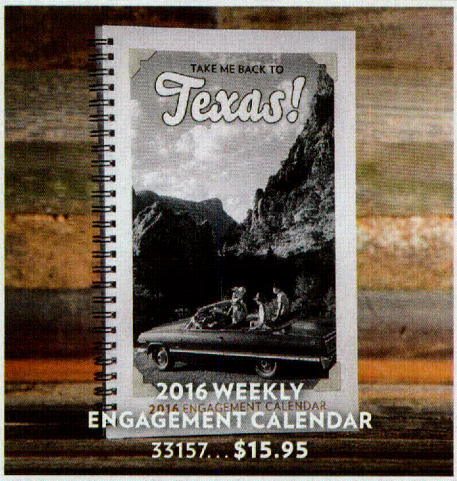
Text by **ERIN INKS** *and* **JULIE STRATTON**
Illustrations by **MICHAEL CRAMPTON**

56 ***Hidden Gems***
Have you ever tempted carnivorous plants in the Big Thicket, gazed upon the snow-white sands of the Guadalupe Mountains' Salt Basin, or made yourself at home in LBJ's private plane? Check out these and other hidden gems at Texas' national parks.

Text by **MELISSA GASKILL**

FIND MORE ONLINE
Be sure to visit us at texashighways.com for more content and events.

Illustration by Michael Crampton



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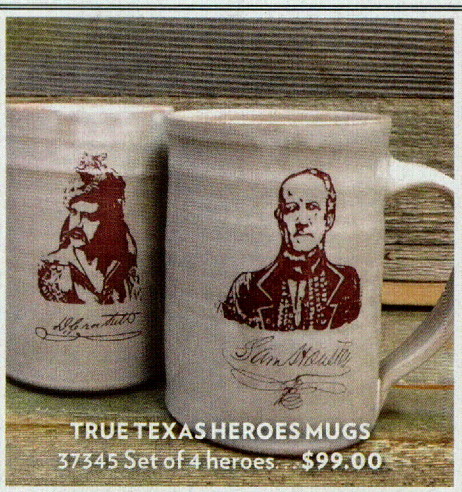

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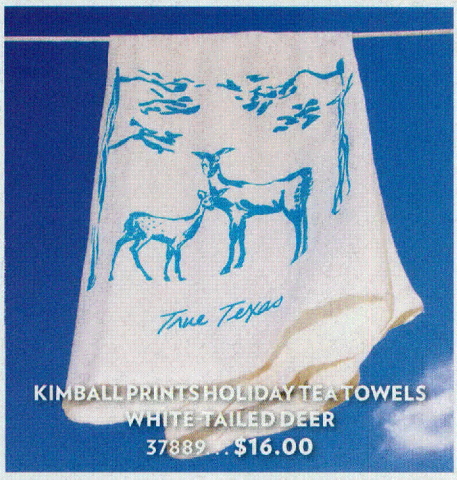

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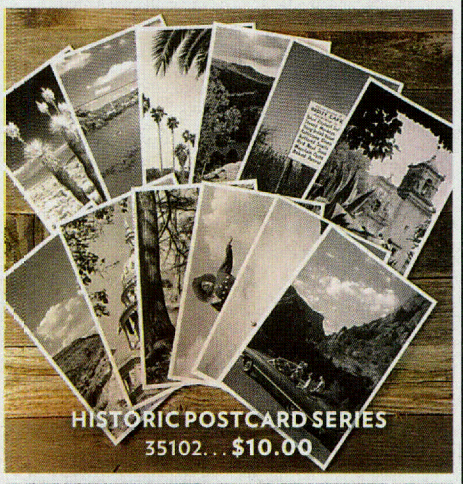

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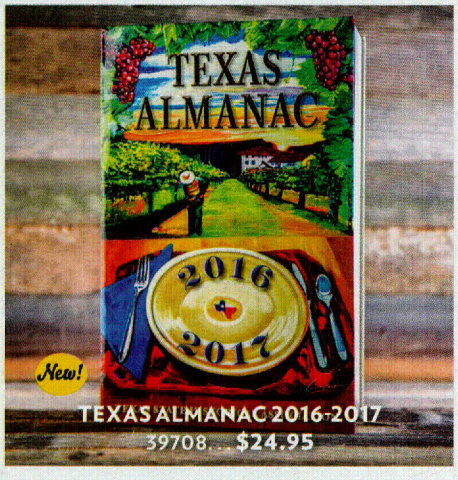

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VOLUME 63 / NUMBER 2

FEBRUARY 2016

The PEOPLE, the PLACES, and WIDE-OPEN SPACES of Texas

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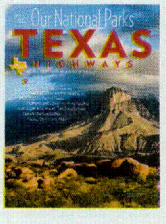

ON OUR COVER

A rising sun illuminates El Capitan at Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Photo © Jerod Foster

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

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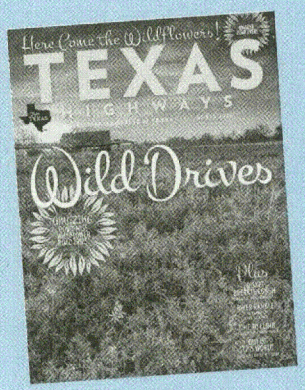

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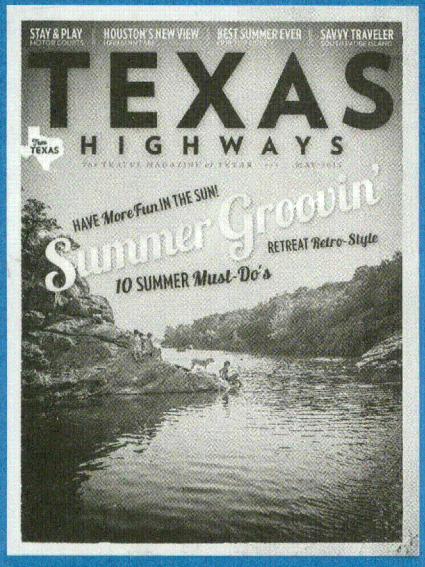

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MERGE

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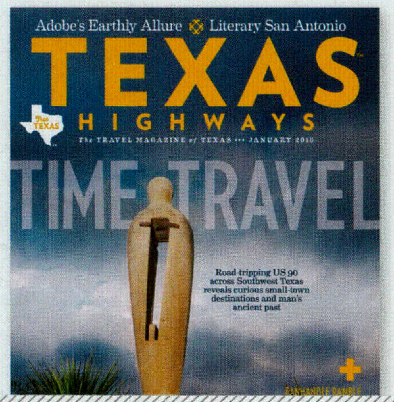
I've gotten every issue of Texas Highways since 2001—can't wait for the mail to come here in Indiana.

WANDA SUE HILLENBURG, Shoals, Indiana



OUR FAVORITE SOCIAL MEDIA OF THE MONTH...

We went to the Monahans Sandhills to fly kites and would get on a tall hill where there were no wires to worry about and the wind was always blowing. What fun it was!
Jennie Fore
Waco

[Waco novelist] Madison Cooper Jr. was my friend Golda's grandmother's brother!
Marian Grabsky
Irving

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Park People

I spent my 60th birthday climbing Guadalupe Peak. We were the slowest people on the mountain, and the last ones to the peak that day, but we didn't care. We made it.
SUZY STEWART BRAZEEL
Facebook

We went to the Guadalupe Mountains and stayed in Dog Canyon one Spring Break. We were surprised to unzip the tent and see a six-point bull elk licking the frost off the roof of our car.
JAMES REX
San Antonio

We took a trip to Big Bend during Spring Break of 1998. My son was six and we camped at the Boquillas campground. It was such an adventure! The ground squirrels entertained us while we ate at our picnic table. The javelina grazed and followed us back and forth to the bathroom. At night the bats would swoop around us chasing bugs. I saw my first bald eagle in the wild while we walked to the showers at the store. We saw the pictographs near the hot springs in the river. We even crossed the river in a little rowboat and ate lunch in the town of Santa Elena. It was a magical trip, and now my son has two kids age four. I can't wait to take the grandbabies and do it again!
BETH VELTROP
Facebook

Rock Talk

I have visited the US 90 area in southwest Texas [January] several times. I suggest picking up the book *Roadside Geology of Texas*. There are some spectacular rocks on this road trip, and this book will tell you where to look and what they are.
BETTY MOORE MCCAULEY
Facebook

The first few times I crossed the US 90 bridge over the Pecos River scared me silly. But when traveling from Sanderson to Del Rio, it's the only way without going all the way around. I got used to it eventually.
JOHNNIE JENKINS JONES
Facebook

READERS RECOMMEND

Fulton Mansion

The Fulton Mansion State Historic Site just underwent a complete renovation, and they were so precise about the renovations to keep everything true to the original home. It's still like stepping back in history. The docents who work there are very knowledgeable about the site, and they offer different seasonal activities that remind us of our past here. We take advantage of all of those events, like Mayfest and the summer Music at the Mansion series. It's such a beautiful setting.
KAREN CLINE-TARDIFF, *Rockport*

The Fulton Mansion State Historic Site is at 317 Fulton Beach Rd. in Rockport. The historic mansion opens Tue-Sat 10-4 and Sun 1-4. The site's Education and History Center opens Tue-Sat 9:30-4:30 and Sun 12:30-4:30. Call 361/729-0386; www.visitfultonmansion.com.

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27° 24' 57.00" N
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Gulf Coast

From Corpus Christi, take Texas 358, cross the John F. Kennedy Memorial Causeway onto Padre Island and Park Road 22 to reach the 70 miles of undeveloped beaches and natural habitat that comprise Padre Island National Seashore. This photo was taken near the Malaquite Visitor Center at the southern end of Park Road 22. Visitors can see a program at the visitor center, beachcomb, bike (bring your own), swim, fish, camp, and, from mid-June through August, observe the release of sea turtle hatchlings.

For more information on Padre Island National Seashore, visit www.nps.gov/pais.

PHOTO: © Kenny Braun

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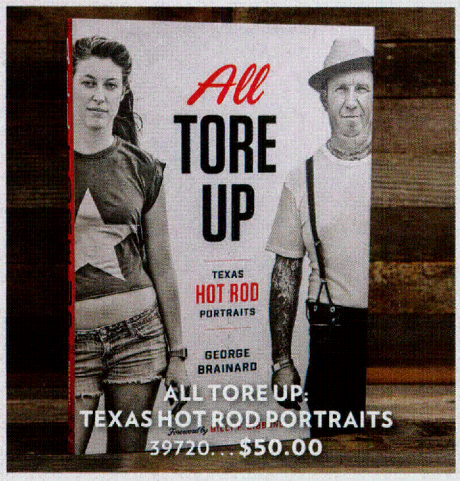

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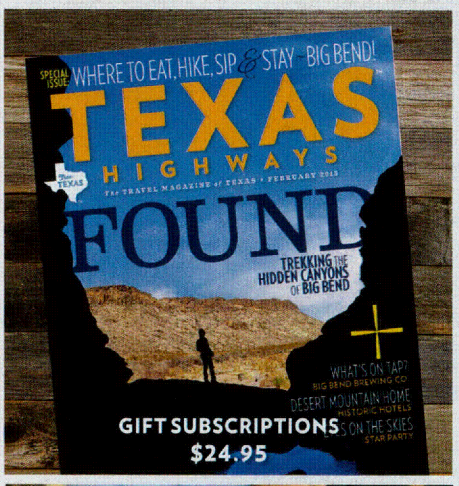

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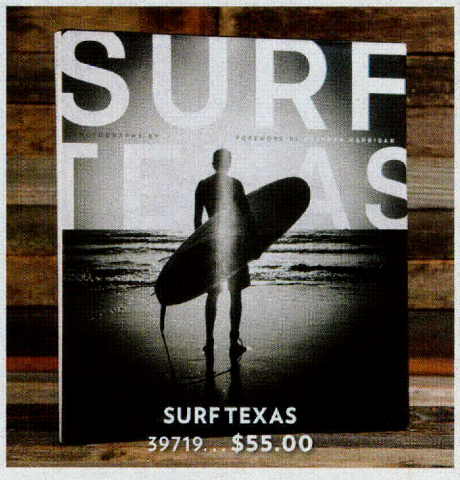

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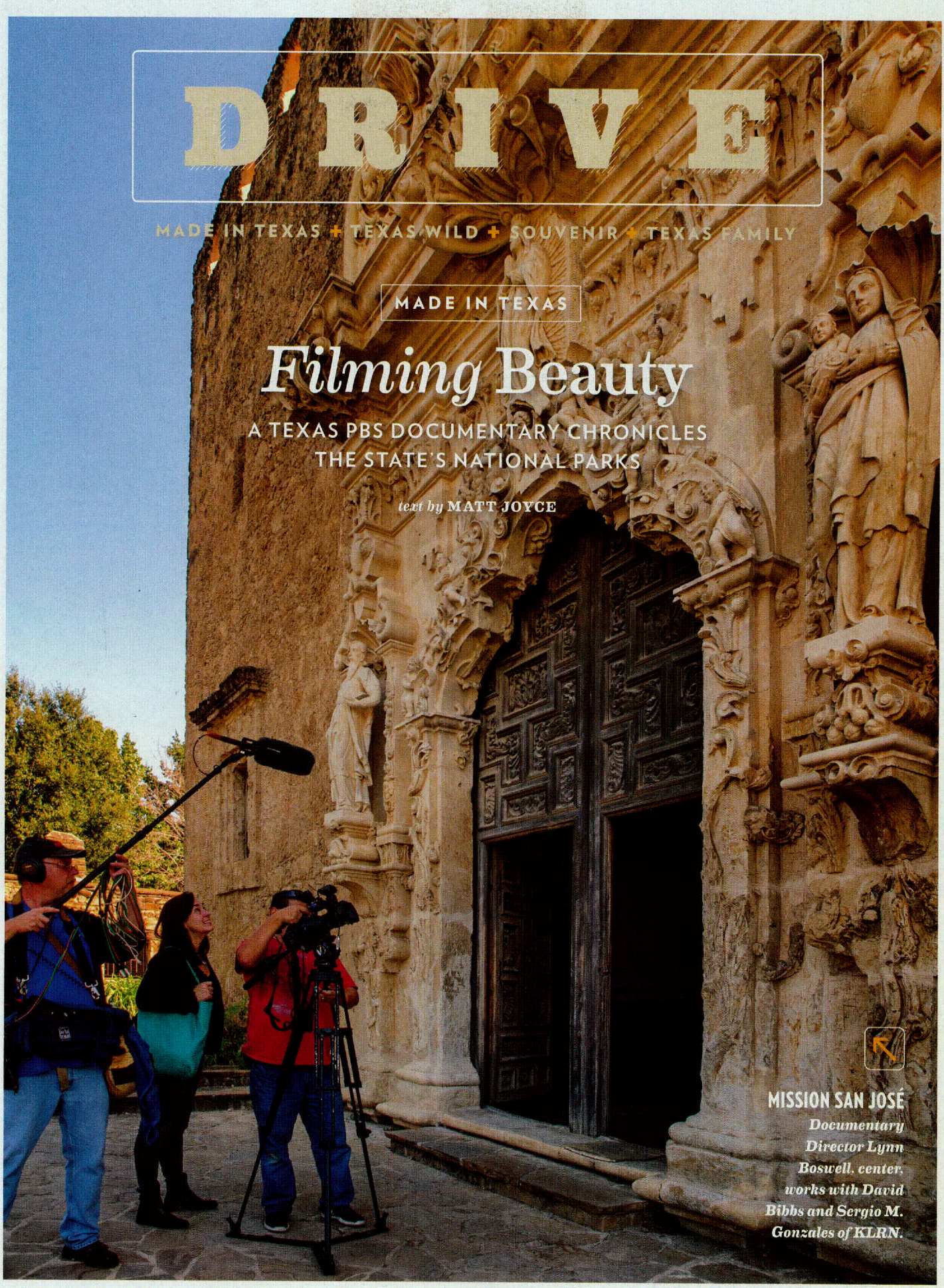
MADE IN TEXAS

Filming Beauty

A TEXAS PBS DOCUMENTARY CHRONICLES THE STATE'S NATIONAL PARKS

text by **MATT JOYCE**



MISSION SAN JOSÉ *Documentary Director Lynn Boswell, center, works with David Bibbs and Sergio M. Gonzales of KLRN.*

PHOTO: Michael Amador

Mission San José, San Antonio

IN THE SPAN OF ROUGHLY ONE YEAR, documentary filmmaker Lynn Boswell has hiked the Guadalupe Mountains carrying a camera tripod, rung the historic church bell at Mission Concepción, shed a tear at the moving spectacle of sea-turtle hatchlings scurrying into the surf at Padre Island, explored Big Thicket mushrooms, and boated Lake Amistad in search of prehistoric pictographs. These and other far-flung adventures are all part of Boswell's work as producer, writer, and director of *The National Parks of Texas: In Contact With Beauty*, a Texas PBS documentary celebrating the National Park Service's centennial year. The documentary covers each of the 16 Park Service sites across the state. We tagged along for a November trek to the missions in San Antonio (where Boswell grew up) to learn more.

THE NATIONAL PARKS OF TEXAS: IN CONTACT WITH BEAUTY will air on PBS stations across Texas in late April. For information on broadcast times, as well as complementary lesson plans and educational materials, visit **texaspbs.org/nationalparks/**.

***TH*: How did this project come about?**

Boswell: The National Parks Conservation Association and the Big Bend Conservancy approached Texas PBS about doing some kind of collaboration for the centennial. Texas PBS approached me and asked for thoughts and advice on what kind of project could be a good fit for that. My answer was, "I think you should do a documentary about all the National Park Service sites in the state, and I would love to be the one to do it."

***TH*: Why were the park advocacy groups interested in making a film?**

PHOTO: Michael Amador

Boswell: When they knew the centennial was coming and knew that there would be all this press about it, their thought was, "We're glad people know about the parks, but we don't want the takeaway in Texas to be: It's the centennial—go to California, go to Arizona, go to Wyoming, go to Maine. You need to know what's in your backyard." And so the mission of this project is to highlight all of these amazing parks that are here and their diversity—geographically, historically, and in terms of activities.

***TH:* You travel by yourself and then work with local crews. How does that work?**

Boswell: There's a cameraperson and an audio person for each shoot. We're using crews from the PBS stations around the state as much as we can to reduce travel costs, and because they're experts in where we are. I have traveled with crews to a few parks where local crews weren't an option.

***TH:* What are you looking for from a visual perspective?**

Boswell: We're looking for pretty things, first of all, and looking for shots that take the park to people. We're trying to represent the park visually as much as we can and to tell the story of what's here, and also to capture it in an interesting way—less like a postcard and more helping you see things in a way that you don't always see them.

***TH:* How did you come up with the title, *The National Parks of Texas: In Contact With Beauty*?**

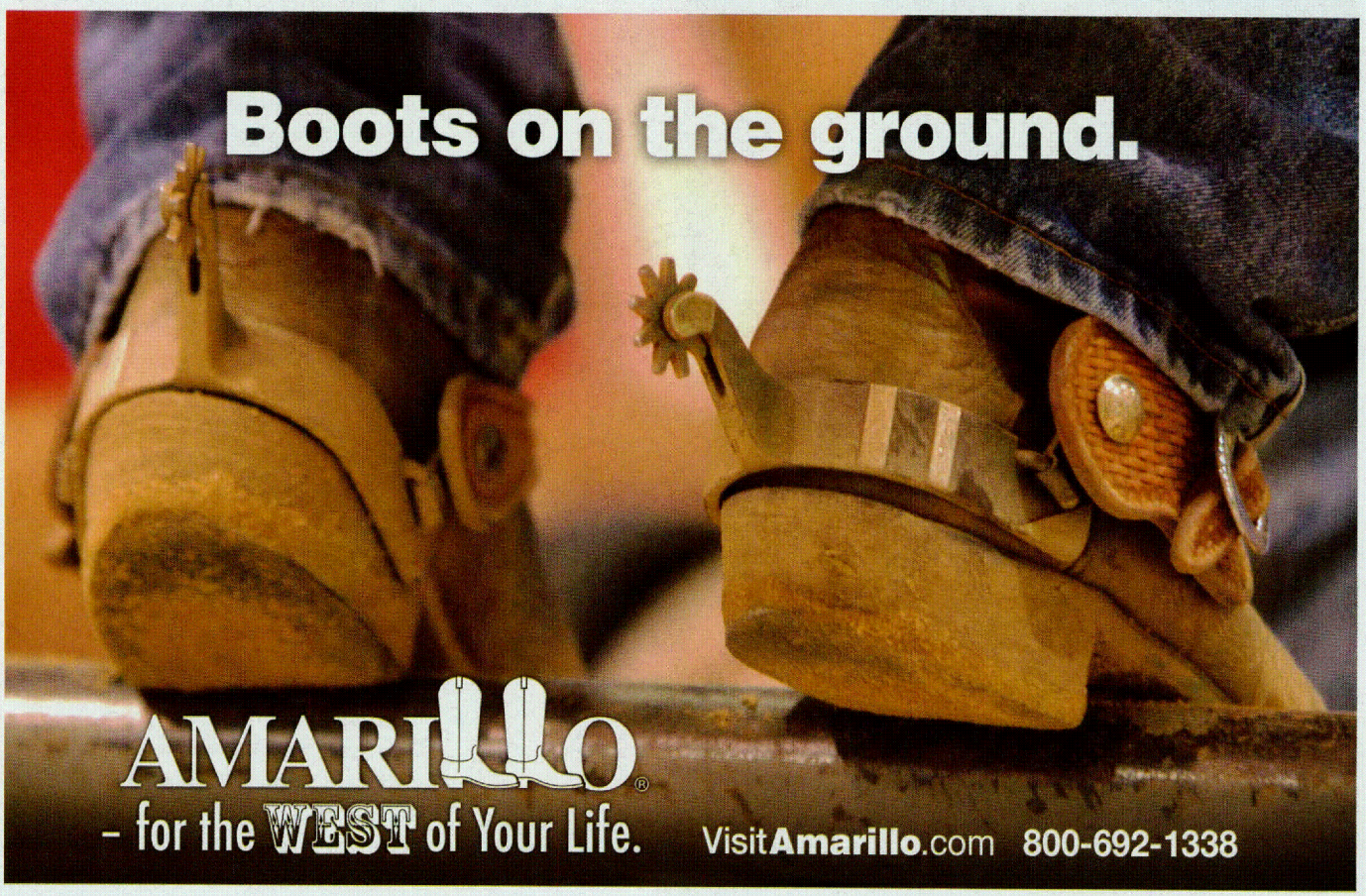
Boswell: The phrase "in contact with beauty" comes from a speech that Lyndon Johnson gave in 1965. He was talking about a pretty global effort for conservation. ... His point was that everyone everywhere deserves to have beauty around them, and that there's something that matters about that in people's lives; that it's important to preserve these places that are remote and wild, like Big Bend and the Guadalupe Mountains, but it's equally important to preserve things that are in the middle of cities, like Chamizal in El Paso, to give people green space where they live, to make sure everyone has access to a place like that.

***TH:* Who's the narrator?**

Boswell: [Former U.S. Senator] Kay Bailey Hutchison. We're very excited to have her narrating it. She was such an advocate for the parks when she was in office, and she continues to offer her support to the state's national park sites today. She also sounds like Texas in a wonderful way.

***TH:* How is the film organized?**

Boswell: Roughly chronologically in



the order that the parks came into being. The line that we've been using all along is, "the past, present, and future of the national park sites of Texas." We wanted to catch most of a year in the parks. So we got Big Bend in the spring; we got Padre in the summer with the turtles and the people enjoying the beach; we went to Guadalupe Mountains in the fall to see the fall color. We really scheduled the project to capture as many seasons as we could, and to catch the very best that we could at each place.

***TH:* Is it possible to say what's been your favorite park?**

Boswell: No! I think my favorite park is the last park I visited, truly. I'd been to a lot of these places before, not all of them, and so it's been really fun to see some that were on my wish list. I've told several people that I've crossed a whole lot off my bucket list, but I've added just as much.

I hope that people take away an understanding that whatever you're interested in, there's a park where you can do that.

***TH:* What is an interesting takeaway from your experience?**

Boswell: Seeing all the parks in the span of a single year has given me a much deeper understanding of how diverse these places are. When you go within 24 hours from the Big Thicket to Guadalupe Mountains, it's pretty amazing to think that all exists within the borders of a single state. Also, the amount of scientific research that goes on in the parks, that's been really an amazing thing to see—all the scientists who use the parks for all kinds of different things that ultimately build on our shared knowledge. That's pretty cool.

***TH:* What do you hope viewers take away?**

Boswell: I hope that people take away an understanding that whatever you're interested in, there's a park where you can do that. If you're interested in history, you can do that. You can go to a mass in a church that's been doing that for hundreds of years. You can learn about biology. You can hike and raft or kayak and get to a place where you are totally alone. You can go bass fishing. You can see rock art. You can go look at carnivorous plants. You name it. The other thing I would really encourage people to do is, when they are in these parks, talk to the rangers. They have so much knowledge and they're so good at sharing it. These people are true believers in these places, and they want you to love these places like they do. ★

Wild About Wild Basin

EXPLORING AN URBAN PRESERVE IN AUSTIN

text by **Steven Schwartzman**

Trails at Wild Basin total 2.5 miles in length, and they intersect in enough places that visitors can follow loops of varying length and difficulty.

WHEN SOME LONG-OVERDUE RAIN LAST July relieved drought conditions in the Austin area, my thoughts turned to Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve, a 227-acre expanse of woodlands west of downtown. I visit the park frequently to photograph wildflowers and other nature subjects, and I was curious if the preserve's waterfall had begun to flow again. A short trail—less than a mile-and-a-half, round-trip—leads down past limestone outcroppings and stands of Ashe juniper to the place where Bee Creek, which flows from west to east across the property, descends over a wide incline of rock into a pool below. To my relief, I found the creek again rushing down that slope and into a natural pool ringed with newly green ferns within sight of sycamore and cottonwood trees.

WILD BASIN WILDERNESS PRESERVE
is at 805 N. Capital of Texas Hwy. in Austin. Call 512/327-7622; www.wildbasin.org.

PHOTO: © Steven Schwartzman To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit www.texashighwaysprints.com.

The "wild" in Wild Basin could also stand for "wildflowers." Several springs in a row, I've stopped at the entranceway to admire stands of mountain pinks. A single plant can widen into a densely packed dome of tapering, bullet-like buds and gorgeous pink flowers by the dozens. The property hosts many other spring wildflowers with picturesque names. Blue stars produce flowers whose five cool-white petals make them look like propellers or stylized stars. The diminutive Dutchman's breeches resemble old-fashioned pantaloons from Holland. In the summer, woolly ironweed has fuzzy whitish buds and rich purple flowers. On an October visit, I saw my first Great Plains ladies' tresses orchid of the season; in the 1800s, the plant's rising spirals of white flowers reminded people of braids of women's hair. I also saw more flowering stands of tatalencho (a shrubby plant with clusters of yellow flowers and a woody stem) than I've ever seen anywhere else in Central Texas.

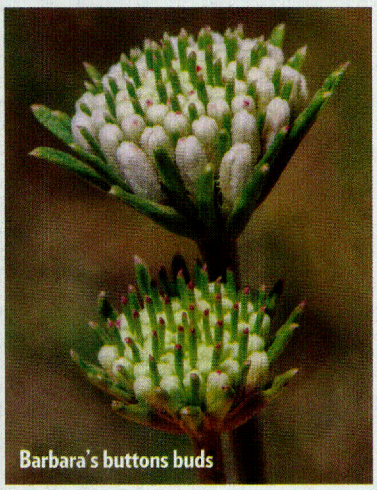
The Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve has graced the hills on the west side of town for decades, yet many Austin-area residents and visitors remain unaware of it.

The Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve has graced the hills on the west side of town for decades, yet many Austin-area residents and visitors remain unaware of it. And, in fact, the preserve might not exist today were it not for the vision of seven Austin women who saw beauty where many others saw prime real estate for development. In the 1970s, the women, members of the environmental group Now or Never who would soon be known as "the little old ladies in tennis shoes," embarked to protect the land from housing or retail development and took on its preservation as their Bicentennial project. Persevering through various setbacks, the group gradually secured parcel after parcel, and by the 1980s, the preserve reached its current size.

Of the 227 acres that make up Wild Basin today, Travis County owns 164 and St. Edward's University owns the other 63. The university backing is important because St. Edward's operates the Wild Basin Creative Research Center, the educational heart of the

Mountain pink plant

Four-nerve daisy


Barbara's buttons buds

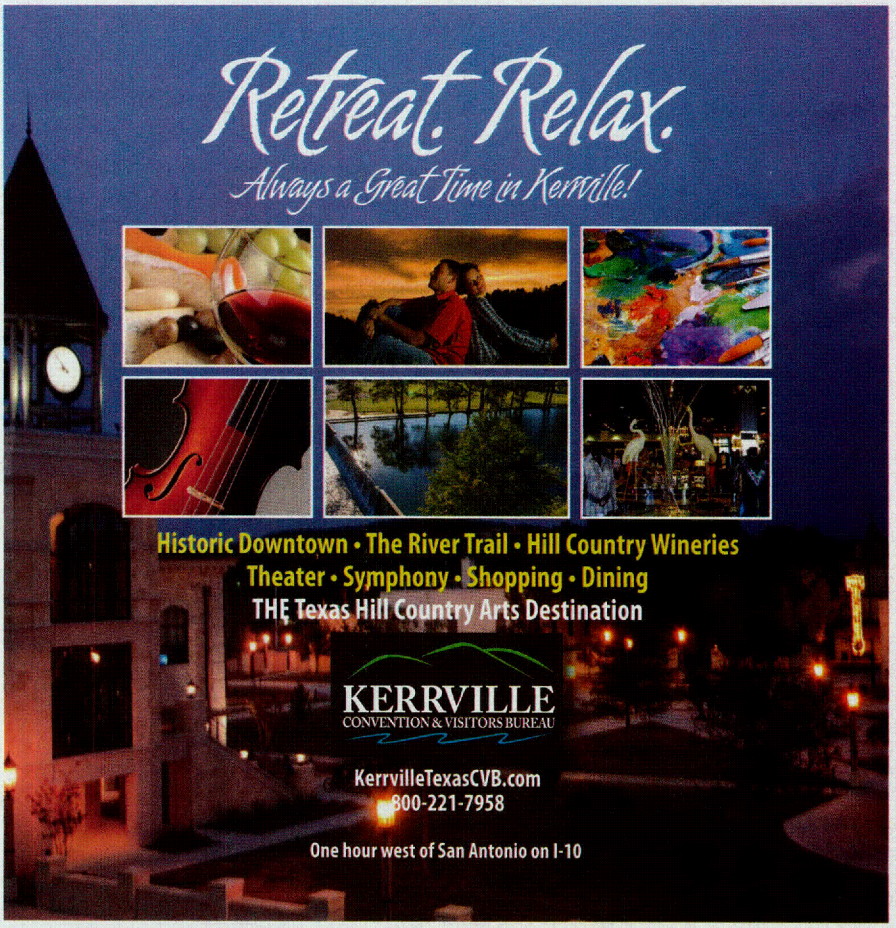
PHOTOS: © Steven Schwartzman

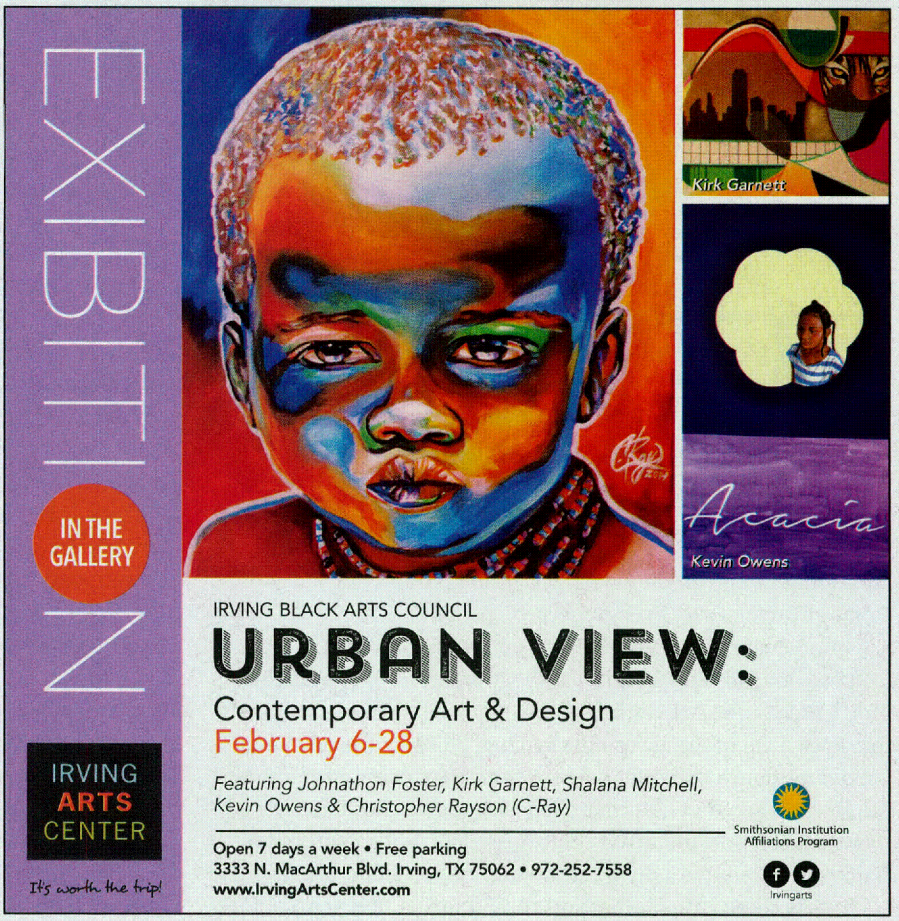
preserve. Between 1,000 and 1,500 schoolchildren a year participate in class trips to Wild Basin, where they take guided hikes and explore environmental topics such as geology and how to identify wildlife and plants. At a higher level, faculty and students from St. Edward's carry out scientific research throughout the year.

Trails at Wild Basin total 2.5 miles in length, and they intersect in enough places that visitors can follow loops of varying length and difficulty. The shortest and most level circuit is the Arroyo Vista Loop, which is the one closest to the parking area. Near the farthest point along that trail, a scenic overlook offers visitors their most expansive view, which stretches out across a valley mostly filled with juniper trees and then up into the steep opposite slope.

Wild Basin forms a part of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. Significant portions of that entity remain closed to the public, so Wild Basin acts as a gateway to the larger preserve by hosting public events. The Austin Astronomical Society, for instance, holds periodic star parties here. During the daytime, on the second Saturday of each month, Wild Basin's volunteer trail guides lead groups on two-hour, information-packed hikes. Using binoculars, springtime visitors may even catch a glimpse of the endangered golden-cheeked warbler, and rarely, the black-capped vireo.

If you'd prefer to hike on your own, the Creative Research Center provides a printed map that you can also download on a smartphone. A display inside the visitor center features a large, three-dimensional contour map of Wild Basin. Press any of several buttons, and the corresponding trail lights up so you can plan your route through the preserve. The map's contour lines let you gauge your time and energy, especially for the 200-plus feet of elevation gain coming back up from Bee Creek and the waterfall. Believe me, it's well-worth the venture. ★





Art Within *Reach*

AFFORDABLE BEAUTY AT TWO ALPINE GALLERIES

text by **Jane Wu**

THESE DAYS, MARFA GETS ALL THE attention as an arts destination in West Texas. While the reputation is well-deserved, with the Chinati Foundation and globally recognized galleries calling Marfa home, there is also a thriving arts community in nearby Alpine. Art is everywhere in this town—the banks, cafés, motels, and on the street with murals depicting slices of Texas culture nearly everywhere you turn.

Alpine is home to more than 15 art galleries, and I discovered two on Holland Avenue—Gallery on the Square and next door, CatchLight Art Gallery—that showcase diverse, attainable artworks in an accessible setting. These galleries keep consistent hours and offer a broad spectrum of art from realism to abstract at prices that fit most budgets. Both galleries operate as co-ops, meaning that the artists whose works are displayed here have a direct stake in the shops' operations.

I first walked into Gallery on the Square a few years ago to visit a friend and see his bold acrylic portraits of chickens. As I walked around the modest, no-frills shop, I was amazed by the scope and depth of many of the pieces. All of the artists reside in the Big Bend area, and most of the work is inspired by the region, whether it's the lush, undulating terrain or the idiosyncratic, unpretentious sensibility that's common here.

When you purchase art at Gallery on the Square and CatchLight Art Gallery, it's possible you may be buying the piece directly from the artist, who can share a story about the work.

I was drawn to a tiny candy dish, nearly obscured among larger pottery and jewelry displays. The glossy yet imperfect glaze, adorned by a simple petaled flower framed in dots, had a nostalgic but modern quality that I found irresistible. I turned the bowl over to see the price and was astonished at how affordable it was: $12. My friend saw me admire the dish and noted, "Oh, that was made by Karen Nakakihara, and she lives right here in Alpine."

On a more recent visit to Alpine, I returned to Gallery on the Square hoping for a similar find and spoke to Director Jim Senneff. He explained that the gallery is the storefront for the Big Bend Arts Council, a regional arts organization. Members of the council have the opportunity to show their work here. One condition for displaying their pieces is for the artist to "sit" at the shop for one day each month.

There are more than 25 artists showing work at Gallery on the Square, ranging from traditional Trans-Pecos landscapes by Juliana Johnson to whimsical folk-art figures made from discarded toys by Cheryl Frances. The members include both seasoned professional artists and emerging young talent. I was fascinated by the intricate detail of Anne Eckley's "thread paintings"—canyon scenes woven on a sewing machine. You'll find functional art here, too: I admired a large, two-tone wooden rolling pin by Dalvin Jordan, and rows of fountain pens encased in deer antlers, wood, and military campaign ribbons by Alberto Cavazos. Senneff proceeded to show me a slim writing instrument made by Cavazos that I mistook for a pen-and-pencil combo.

PHOTO: Brandon Jakobeit

"This is a teacher's pen," he explained. "One end has blue ink, and the other has red for marking papers."

Next door, CatchLight Art Gallery's co-op features 14 local artists, some whose work is nationally and internationally recognized. In this pleasant and inviting space, you'll find stylized, humorous paintings by award-winning editorial illustrator Tom Curry, and watercolors and oils by Carol Fairlie, who was the Honored Artist at the 2015 Alpine Artwalk, a weekend event held in November. Jewelry artisan Virginia Brotherton was at the gallery, and she explained not only her lapidary process to me, but also that of Marjie Erkkila, another gem designer whose work caught my eye.

Watercolorist Jan Moeller, the president of Big Bend Arts Council, also owns and operates CatchLight. Moeller modeled the co-op concept after a similar gallery that she visited in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Along with selecting talented artists and diverse styles, the criteria for showing work in the gallery remains as it did when the group began in 2007: "Be easy to get along with and help." CatchLight's artists also work at the shop—twice per month—and assist Moeller with maintenance and promotion. "Working here helps the artists gain personal connections with customers, and they can also refer them to their studios," she adds.

As with the gallery co-op next door, CatchLight's artists pay a nominal fee to join the gallery. Both galleries take a much lower commission from art sales than conventional galleries in larger art centers, thus allowing artists to offer more affordable pieces. "Artists whose work has shown in Santa Fe galleries have priced their work up to 50 percent lower here," says Moeller.

Both Gallery on the Square and CatchLight radiate congeniality and inclusiveness with their mix of genres and expertise. After my gallery visits, I remarked on this to a friend familiar with both galleries, and he recalled the quote made famous by John F. Kennedy, "A rising tide lifts all boats." When I commented on this to Moeller, she invoked the same quote. This cooperative spirit among artists is not only alive and well, but flourishing. ★

ALPINE'S CO-OP GALLERIES

Gallery on the Square is at 115 W. Holland Ave. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. Closed Wednesdays. Call **432/837-7203**; **www.bigbendartscouncil.org/gallery-on-the-square**.

CatchLight Art Gallery is at 117 W. Holland Ave. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. Closed Tuesdays. Call **432/837-9422**; **www.catchlightartgallery.com**.

Cabin *Fever*

AN OFF-SEASON ESCAPE AT GARNER STATE PARK

text by **Daniel Blue Tyx**

We enjoyed our very own private moment of blissful summer vacation, right in the middle of winter.

"BUT WON'T IT BE COLD?" MY IN-LAWS ASKED, WHEN I first proposed the idea of a February getaway to Garner State Park. They were visiting from Wisconsin, where the idea of camping in winter is about as foreign as snow in South Texas. But not to worry, I assured them: Even if the weather didn't cooperate, we could always stay huddled together by the limestone fireplace in one of the park's cozy wooden cabins, which were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

As it turned out, though, we didn't need to worry about the cold, or just about anything else, either. The cold front that had been predicted for the weekend never quite blew in, and when we pulled into the cabin parking lot just in time for dinner on Friday night, the gauge on the dash in Grandma and Grandpa's truck read a pleasant 65 degrees.

A PARK FOR ALL SEASONS

Winter brings special charms to Garner State Park in the form of peacefulness and tranquility. Byrdie Tyx, the author's son, frolics in the Frio River.

PHOTOS: © Laurence Parent; Inset courtesy Daniel Blue Tyx

In anticipation of our arrival, the park staff had left the outside light on and the front door open. Our two preschoolers, Byrdie and Ana, rushed inside to check out their weekend playhouse, while Grandma and Grandpa got busy unloading the gear. Meanwhile, my wife Laura and I paused for a moment to breathe in the Hill Country air and catch a moonlit glimpse of Old Baldy, the majestic bluff that stands quiet watch over the campground.

We were already feeling overjoyed just to be out of the city (and the car), and then we walked into the cabin. Through years of family reunions and off-season adventures, I've stayed at my fair share of state park cabins, and to my mind none quite compare to these. Inspired by the pioneer architecture of the German immigrants of the region, the cabins have been thoughtfully updated with modern conveniences, but in such a way that the essential rustic spirit remains intact. Sure, it's nice to have heating and air conditioning and brand-new stainless-steel kitchen appliances, but what I'll really remember is the native limestone of the fireplace, which was quarried in the surrounding hills, and the bald cypress of the exposed beams, which was felled by Depression-era workers and trimmed and planed right here in the park. The experience of staying in these new-but-old cabins was like being transported back in time to 1941, when the park opened.

GARNER STATE PARK is eight miles north of Concan, at 234 Ranch Road 1050, just off US 83. For cabin reservations and availability, call **512/389-8900**; for park information, call **830/232-6132**; **www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/garner**.

Back then, the freshly finished cabins must have wowed new visitors the same way they wowed us today.

After a splendid night's sleep with the cabin windows open, Byrdie and Ana woke us up at first light, eager to explore the caves we'd seen marked on the trail map left for us on the fireplace mantle. After breakfast, we found the trailhead marked White Rock Cave and started to climb ... and climb ... and climb.

It may be called the Hill Country, but for two kids ages five and three—and, if we're being honest, for their parents and grandparents—the landscape definitely felt more like mountains. We quickly shed the layers of clothing we'd worn in anticipation of an early-morning chill, and Laura and I were glad to be able to split the child-toting duties with Grandpa. Still, the destination was well worth the 20 minutes of strenuous exertion, as the kids enjoyed pretending they were going on

a bear hunt inside the cave, and the adults marveled at the view of the Frio River valley stretching for miles, seemingly right beneath our feet.

We were enjoying our hike so much that no one noticed when Byrdie and I managed to lead us on a wrong turn, which meant that our trek back to the park road took an hour longer than expected. By the time we made it back, Ana was sleeping in my arms, and the rest of us were ready for lunch and then for some cooling off down by the river.

The experience of staying in these new-but-old cabins was like being transported back in time to 1941, when the park opened. Back then, the freshly finished cabins must have wowed new visitors the same way they wowed us today.

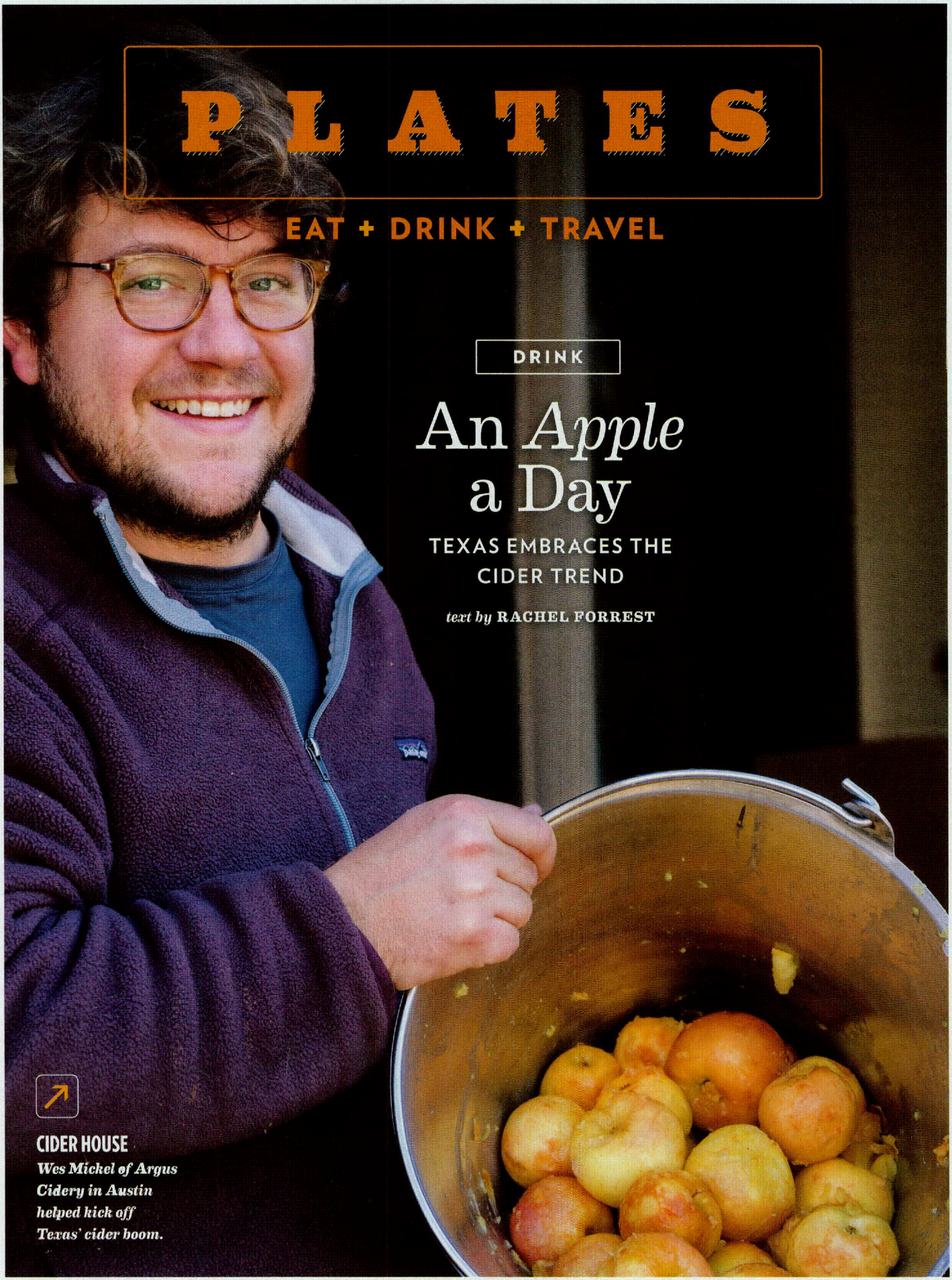
In the summertime, the Frio River teems with squealing children and teenage tubers, and while that kind of youthful energy is definitely its own kind of fun, it was also nice to have the water completely to ourselves. And yes, it was a bit *frío*, but by that time the sun was high in the sky, and after a few minutes we forgot it had ever been cold to begin with. As the adults let the water ripple over our legs and the kids splashed around, we enjoyed our very own private moment of blissful summer vacation, right in the middle of winter.

Back at the cabin, after dinner we'd prepared outside over an open fire, we waited for the embers to die down enough to roast marshmallows. Three generations of our family sat at the picnic table and stared through the treetops at the stars just beginning to appear in the crystalline night sky.

"This," Grandma said, holding her granddaughter in her lap, "was wellnigh the perfect day." ★

PLATES

EAT + DRINK + TRAVEL



DRINK

An *Apple* a Day

TEXAS EMBRACES THE CIDER TREND

text by **RACHEL FORREST**

CIDER HOUSE
Wes Mickel of Argus Cidery in Austin helped kick off Texas' cider boom.

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

NEAR THE CONFLUENCE OF Bear and Onion creeks on a 20-acre ranch in far south Austin, I'm touring the fermentation room of Texas Keeper Cider, surrounded by stacks of tubs full of pale yellow and deep gold apple juice, which will soon become some of the state's finest hard cider. Next door is the taproom, housed in a 19th-Century church/schoolhouse.

But before we visit the taproom, cidery co-founders Brandon Wilde and Nick Doughty offer me a taste of their new Cider Noir, a delicious refresher made with New York heirloom apples. They've double-fermented it with pecans and orange peel.

"What do you taste? What flavors are you getting? Don't worry, this isn't a test," jokes Brandon.

Mellow caramel with a finish of chicory and an earthy hint of rosemary come to mind as we enter the taproom, which recently opened for Saturday tours and tastings. With a fieldstone fireplace, longleaf pine paneling, dark wooden ceiling beams, and a long wooden bar for sampling cider, it's a great setting for occasional live music and special events or simply mingling with other cider fans. Outside is a limestone patio where guests can throw horseshoes, play bocce, or picnic the afternoon away. Brandon and Nick show me a framed collection of 19th-Century silver coins, bullets, belt buckles, and other artifacts uncovered here by the local metal detectors club on their recent visit, and I can imagine a horse-drawn journey along nearby Old San Antonio Road back in the day. The history out here is just now starting to come to light.

These days, cidermakers bring their knowledge of winemaking and brewing to the beverage considered America's original drink, creating ciders known for their nuance, balance, and complexity.

"We want people to come out, relax, and spend the afternoon with us," says Nick. "We like to bring out guest chefs and music, and of course the cider is central. In our taproom, we have not only cider, but also wine and mead, and we offer a rotating list of ciders from the other cideries in Texas, as well as ours. We want people to really take a look at craft cider."

Wine and cider have a lot in common: Both beverages are made by using yeast to ferment fruit, but cidermakers usually work with apples and pears instead of grapes and have more flexibility in fermentation, using beer yeast, wine yeast, and often ambient "wild" yeast to create flavor variations. When cider is bottled, it typically has an alcohol content in the 5-9% range, meaning that it's lighter than most wines yet stronger than most beers.

Texas currently has five cideries, with several more to come on the scene soon. Austin has the strongest showing, with three cideries—Texas Keeper Cidery, Austin Eastciders, and Argus Cidery. These three, along with Leprechaun Cider Company in Houston and Dallas' Bishop Cider Co., have been in the business for less than six years. Much is still evolving in these relatively new enterprises.

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

Austin Eastciders is planning a tasting room at its large cidery in urban east Austin, hoping to open to the public in summer 2016. Until then, you can find Austin Eastciders' Original Dry and Texas Honey ciders in just about every bar and restaurant in Austin and surrounding towns. And while Leprechaun doesn't offer tours, you can taste its ciders throughout the state (I like their Dry Cider). And in Dallas, Bishop Cider Co. has a tasting room open six days a week in the lively Bishop Arts District of the city.

Yet there's something about being out in the country sipping cider that brings the history of our cider heritage into focus. While I think of New England's colonial cider history and the abundant apple crops in New York and Oregon as centers of cidermaking, the southern United States had a pre-Prohibition cider culture that made use of native fruit. These days, cidermakers bring their knowledge of winemaking and brewing to the beverage considered America's original drink, creating ciders known for their nuance, balance, and complexity.

At Texas Keeper, the Cider Noir and the popular Ciderweizen, an unfiltered grapefruit-forward spice and floral bomb that's the state's first hopped cider, show just how creative our new Texas cider-makers can be.

"With cider, there are no rules yet, so we can really experiment," says Nick. "The Ciderweizen is partly like a wine and partly like a brew in a hefeweizen style, but we treat the cider like an aromatic white wine."

Before delving into cider, Nick and his longtime partner Lindsey Peebles studied winemaking in New Zealand, while Brandon was an avid home

TEXAS CIDERIES

Texas Keeper Cider is at 12521 Twin Creeks Rd. in Austin. Call for hours, **512/910-3409**; **www.texaskeeper.com**.

Argus Cidery is at 12345 Pauls Valley Rd., Ste. 2, in Austin. Hours: Sat 1 p.m.-6 p.m. **www.arguscidery.com**.

Bishop Cider Co. is at 509 N. Bishop Ave., Ste. C, in Dallas. Hours: Tue-Thu 5 p.m.-10 p.m., Fri- Sat noon to midnight, Sun noon to 6 p.m. **www.bishopcider.com**.

Austin Eastciders on Springdale Rd. in Austin. **www.austineastciders.com**. Tasting room projected to open summer 2016.

For details about Leprechaun Cider Company in Houston (no tasting room), see **www.leprechauncider.com**.

brewer. Together, the trio combine their knowledge and skills to produce dry, balanced ciders that pair well with food. Nick tells me that dry ciders with hints of citrus pair well with mild fish dishes, while fruity, robust releases that showcase the apple variety complement pork and barbecue. Cider pairs especially well with spicy dishes and Tex-Mex, as the mineral aspects of the apples contrast with the heat of peppers. Being able to sample and talk about pairings at the ranch is part of the experience.

Less than 20 miles northwest of Texas Keeper is Argus Cidery, part of a Hill Country "beverage trail" you'll likely want to spend an entire day exploring. A mile past Jester King Brewery, which could be your first stop, a small business park houses three of Texas' most progressive beverage makers, including Revolution Spirits, Last Stand Brewing Company, and Argus. Treaty Oak Distilling also offers sips and tours just a few miles away, but for now, I'm in the area for the cider.

A hand-strung chandelier illuminates a warehouse with open barn doors at Argus Cidery's production facility and rustic tasting room. As light glitters on the eight stainless-steel tanks, founders Wes and Mary Mickel tell me how they founded the cidery in 2010 and moved to this spot in 2011.

"At the time we started, there was hardly anything out here," says Wes. "Jester King had just opened up the road, so it seemed promising. I love the dry Basque styles of cider, and we wanted to make great farmhouse styles using wild yeast. And we wanted to build a place to showcase that farmhouse concept, a place where people could hang out. We have the press next door to the fermentation bins, so it's all right here."

Like Jester King Brewery, Argus experiments with naturally found yeasts to create ciders that reflect elements found in the area. "We're experimenting with different yeast profiles and coming up with what a pilsner would taste like if it were made from apples," says Wes. "The tasting room gives us a chance to try out some of our experimental ciders."

At the tasting room bar, I sample a flight of four ciders, including Argus' unpasteurized Ginger Perry, a snappy pear-based cider. I resist the bowls of peanuts on the long, handcrafted center table and sip a glass of Stellar, a barrel-aged cider made with the Southern Ozark Stellar apple. Guests mingle outside, where a toddler and her dad roll bocce balls around. At the bar, we discuss which ciders to take home in bottles and growlers, and make plans to visit the other cideries in the state.

With new ciders ready to taste on a regular basis, I'll keep coming back to find out what Texas' innovative cider makers have come up with next. I may even brush up on my bocce skills. ★

Abi-Haus

Elevating Abilene

A NEW FRONTIER FOR DOWNTOWN'S BUSTLING BISTRO SCENE

text by **June Naylor**

THE BLACKBOARDS COVERING the walls of Abi-Haus, Abilene's buzziest eating-drinking hotspot, serve as more than artful design elements, though they accomplish that function well. Some, as you might expect, inform patrons about daily Abi-Haus specials. But mostly, the curlicue-festooned words, hand-drawn in a Western-Victorian style, comfort and inspire.

Sitting down at one of the dining tables, I'm so taken with the messages that it's difficult to concentrate on the menu. Each of these blackboards, either suspended high above tables or tucked into nooks and crannies of the busy bistro, speaks of family, friendship, love, and fearlessness. The largest of these signs hangs beside a community table, reading, "Abilene ... I can fly," surrounded by a fanciful heart.

"We are all so proud to be a part of the exciting renaissance that is happening in downtown Abilene."

I'm intrigued. Who's bursting with all this positive energy? Turns out that's proprietors Jimbo Jackson and Ryan Feerer, who I meet along with Jimbo's wife Jessica during my meal, as they enjoy spending time with patrons almost any time the Abi-Haus doors are open.

The "I can fly" motto not only honors Abilene's close ties to nearby Dyess Air Force base, where Jimbo retired from service some years ago, but it also reflects the passion he and his team share

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

BIENVENIDOS · WELCOME
MARATHON
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Marathon, TX
Where
Big Bend

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Smoked Salmon BLT

for the city. Abilene is so special to these folks that they've also launched sister businesses to complement the restaurant. Later, as we explore the Jacksons' boutique called Betty & June and Jimbo and Ryan's cocktail lounge called Public Haus, which share the same broad 1885 building as the restaurant, we find each space infused with the owners' youthful, upbeat spirit.

"It's about celebrating the great things in Abilene. Another of the blackboard signs says, 'Long Live Abilene,' which we love," says Jimbo. "We are all so proud to be a part of the exciting renaissance that is happening in downtown Abilene."

Sitting at one of Abi-Haus' antique wooden dinner tables, decorated with fresh flowers and set with pleasingly rumpled linen napkins and simple flatware, my husband and I study the menu and sip gin-basil gimlets from 1930s champagne coupes. We note the crowd around us in the dining room, all in animated conversation back and forth between tables.

As we overhear happy chatter about a new art exhibit at the nearby Grace Museum, we make a concerted effort to decide on dinner. We're here, after all, to enjoy some of the terrific food and drink that has put Abi-Haus on the culinary map. And, as we soon realize, Chef Natalie Mesa deserves the praise heaped on her in the past year or so.

Raising comfort food to new heights, Natalie's flaky turnovers, for instance, serve as an example of how she puts a deluxe spin on even simple things. We break open the golden-brown pastries to reveal a filling of cubed steak braised in stout beer with Manchego cheese. The chicken-and-mash plate borders on perfection: A plump half-chicken roasted until bronze is served atop a fluffy, buttery pillow of skins-on mashed potatoes. Equally sublime, a burly pork shank is braised in red wine and served over cheesy grits with sautéed spinach.

I'm especially taken with thoughtful touches, like the server who arrives tableside with tongs and an ice bucket to freshen our water glasses. The same server knows just which Texas craft beers pair best with our entrees, too,

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

such as Lakewood Temptress Imperial Milk Stout from Dallas and Real Ale's Belgian White from Blanco.

After dinner, we wander around the corner to Public Haus, the watering hole Jimbo and Ryan opened last winter. There's not much in the way of signage, giving Public Haus a bit of a speakeasy appeal. That sense magnifies when the plain front door opens to reveal a lively and very dimly lit joint brimming with folks on barstools, at couches, or seated at tables, enjoying cold beer and classic cocktails.

Returning to Abi-Haus for brunch the next day, we're impressed again by the tableau of convivial community. Taking seats at sidewalk tables, we're drawn into conversation with the proprietors and their many friends, including those who run the nearby Pappy Slokum brewery, the local pig farmer who supplies Abi-Haus with pork, the owner of a neighboring art gallery, and the curator of the Grace Museum.

Amid conversation, we nibble on toasted slices of house-baked bread spread with smashed avocado and sliced tomatoes. Though I'm delighted with my plate of duck hash, served over toasted challah bread and drizzled with hollandaise sauce, I steal bites of my husband's plate of shrimp and jalapeño-bacon-cheese grits.

A FLIGHT OF ABILENE HOT SPOTS

Abi-Haus is at 959 N. 2nd St. in Abilene. Call **325/672-7452**; **www.good-haus.com**.

Public Haus is at 173 Pine St. in Abilene. Call **325/672-7452**; **www.public-haus.com**.

Betty & June is at 189 Pine St. in Abilene. Call **325/672-1522**; **www.betty-june-boutique.myshopify.com**.

After brunch, we spend a little time next door at Betty & June, the chic corner boutique Jimbo and Jessica named for their grandmothers. The one-time insurance company space is now a shop where patrons can nab adult beverages from a vintage fridge to sip while browsing racks of jeans, jackets, frocks, and tops from Los Angeles and New York designers.

On our way back to our inn for a nap, we pass Pappy Slokum Brewing Co. We recognize some of our new friends outside, gathered around picnic tables, sipping the local brews. We see Chef Natalie, serving nachos and pizza from the mobile kitchen inside the Trailer Haus, Abi-Haus' food truck.

This scene recalls my favorite chalkboard sign at Abi-Haus. That's the one that reads, "The fondest memories are made when gathered around the table." It spells out this special Abilene vibe, which happens to taste good, too. ★

Crazy for *Crumbzz*

ARE THESE OLD-WORLD CRUMB CAKES THE WAY TO WORLD PEACE?

text by **Jennifer Babisak**

SINCE RELOCATING TO THE DALLAS suburb of Forney, I've discovered not only the charms of living in a small town, but also several surprising food finds. I've become particularly enamored with a European-style bistro called Crumbzz, located in a historic building downtown. Boasting "the finest crumb cake in the world," the bistro also offers a menu of breakfast and lunch foods with roots in Europe and the Caribbean.

Eager to explore our new town, my husband Matt and I recently took advantage of a rare kid-free weekend by indulging in a breakfast date at Crumbzz. Wanting a prime view of the kitchen action, we chose seats at the Italian Carrera marble bar, which chef and owner J Stephen Sadler told us originated "from the same quarry as Michelangelo's *David*." The vantage point allowed us a peek into the fast-paced workings of the open kitchen, and we watched chefs chopping vegetables and flipping pancakes while instructing assistants on how to time the baking of a perfectly puffed soufflé.

The popular crumb cakes—five regular varieties plus a monthly seasonal special—are based on a 400-year-old Sadler family recipe from Austria.

As I took in the bistro's sleek atmosphere, complete with slate floors, leather chairs, and aluminum tables, I wondered how it came to anchor the revitalization of a downtown populated by only a few other restaurants and boutiques. Sadler filled me in, recounting his journey as a busy New York bakery owner who moved south to escape the harsh northern winters. Landing first in Fort Lauderdale, Sadler put the bakery business on hold for awhile to pursue other business interests, and soon began looking for a city with easier airline access to both coasts. "I researched the biggest airports in the country and looked at a map," Sadler says. "Chicago is too cold, so I moved to Dallas."

In Dallas, though, a chance encounter with a former customer convinced him to get back into the bakery business. "This time," Sadler says with a laugh, "I thought I'd stick to mail-order. I was tired of getting up at 4 a.m." Appearing on a local news program to talk about his mail-order crumb cakes, though, he casually mentioned that he might be amenable to opening a storefront again if he could find a historic building with a workable kitchen. A business booster in Forney saw the program and contacted Sadler with the prospect of moving into an 1865 downtown building that was then serving as offices. The proposal found an enthusiastic recipient in Sadler, who added sophisticated touches to the space while retaining original elements like the

PHOTO: Michael Amador

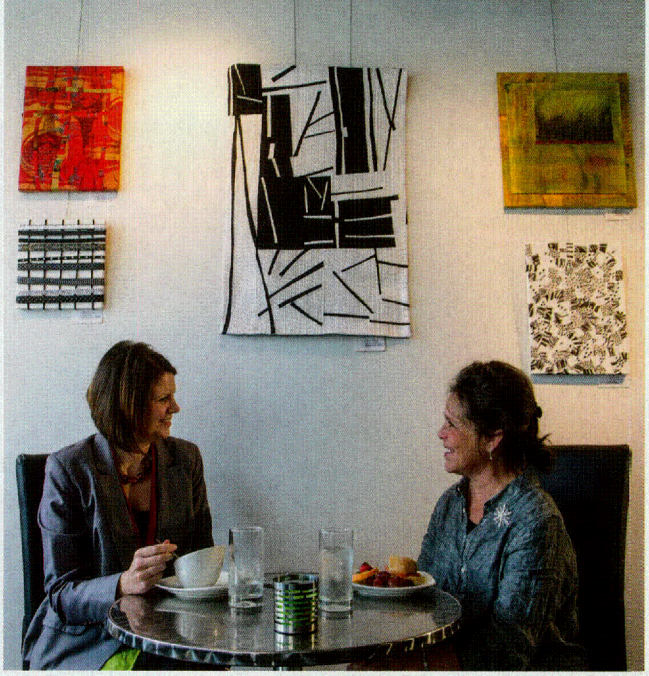
bead-board ceiling. Crumbzz opened for business in 2011.

The menu here reflects Sadler's travels through Europe and the Caribbean. This lively romp in continental cuisine and tropical fare includes dishes like a German-inspired grilled cheese sandwich accented by grilled mushrooms and caramelized onions, a vibrant Italian tomato soup, streusel-topped Parisian style oatmeal, and Jamaican banana-rum French toast. The popular crumb cakes—five regular varieties plus a monthly seasonal special—are based on a 400-year-old Sadler family recipe from Austria. Sadler brings a little bit of Texas to these recipes by using local butter, eggs, and produce whenever possible.

CRUMBZZ EUROPEAN BISTRO
is at 212 S. Bois D'Arc St. in Forney, about 23 miles east of Dallas. Open for breakfast and lunch daily. Call 214/541-9665; www.crumbzz.com.

Scanning the menu, Matt and I decided to share a couple of selections, and we were both immediately drawn to the Gaufres de Liege Waffles. Different from an American "Belgian waffle," the Liege features a caramelized brioche-based dough, so the waffle is dense and very rich; no syrup is necessary (though it's served with a cinnamon-streusel butter). The Liege is the most common type of waffle in Belgium, where it's typically sold by street vendors and eaten by hand. I used a fork to dig in, savoring each bite as the waffle's crunch gave way to a chewy interior.

We also tried the Gamberaia Lemon Ricotta Pancakes, a recipe from Florence. The mention of ricotta cheese and pancakes in the same breath must cause trepidation for some diners, as our waitress warned us a number of times that the texture differs from that of a traditional American pancake.



Sadler has sent "diplomacy cakes" to such world leaders and celebrities as President Barack Obama and John Boehner, Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal, and Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko.

But as I dug into the moist pancake, which was laden with blueberries and topped with powdered sugar and lemon butter, I thought that the only warning these pancakes warrant is that they are addictive.

Of course, we couldn't leave without getting our hands on some of those famous crumb cakes, so we decided to take home a few slices. Later, we tasted the cinnamon streusel crumb cake (the original), as well as the lemon and raspberry varieties. The moist cake serves as a base for a generous layer of crumb topping, where cinnamon presents a mellow note of spice and brown sugar lends subtle sweetness. The lemon and raspberry varieties each hold a dollop of fruit puree, giving the cakes a pleasantly tart contrast.

Tasting the cakes helped us better understand their reputation as a peacemaking pastry. This mission began a number of years ago, when a customer contacted Sadler with a story about her two brothers who hadn't spoken to one another in ages. She wanted to send each brother a crumb cake—from each other—with a message of reconciliation. Thus began Crumbzz's foray into "diplomacy cakes." Many customers experiencing quarrels with family and friends have taken up the custom, and Sadler has also sent "diplomacy cakes" to such world leaders and celebrities as President Barack Obama and John Boehner, Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal, and Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko.

Though I haven't found any proof that a crumb cake has diffused international hostilities, the cakes certainly brought smiles to Matt and me. We didn't even argue over who was more deserving of the last crumb. ★

PHOTO: Michael Amador

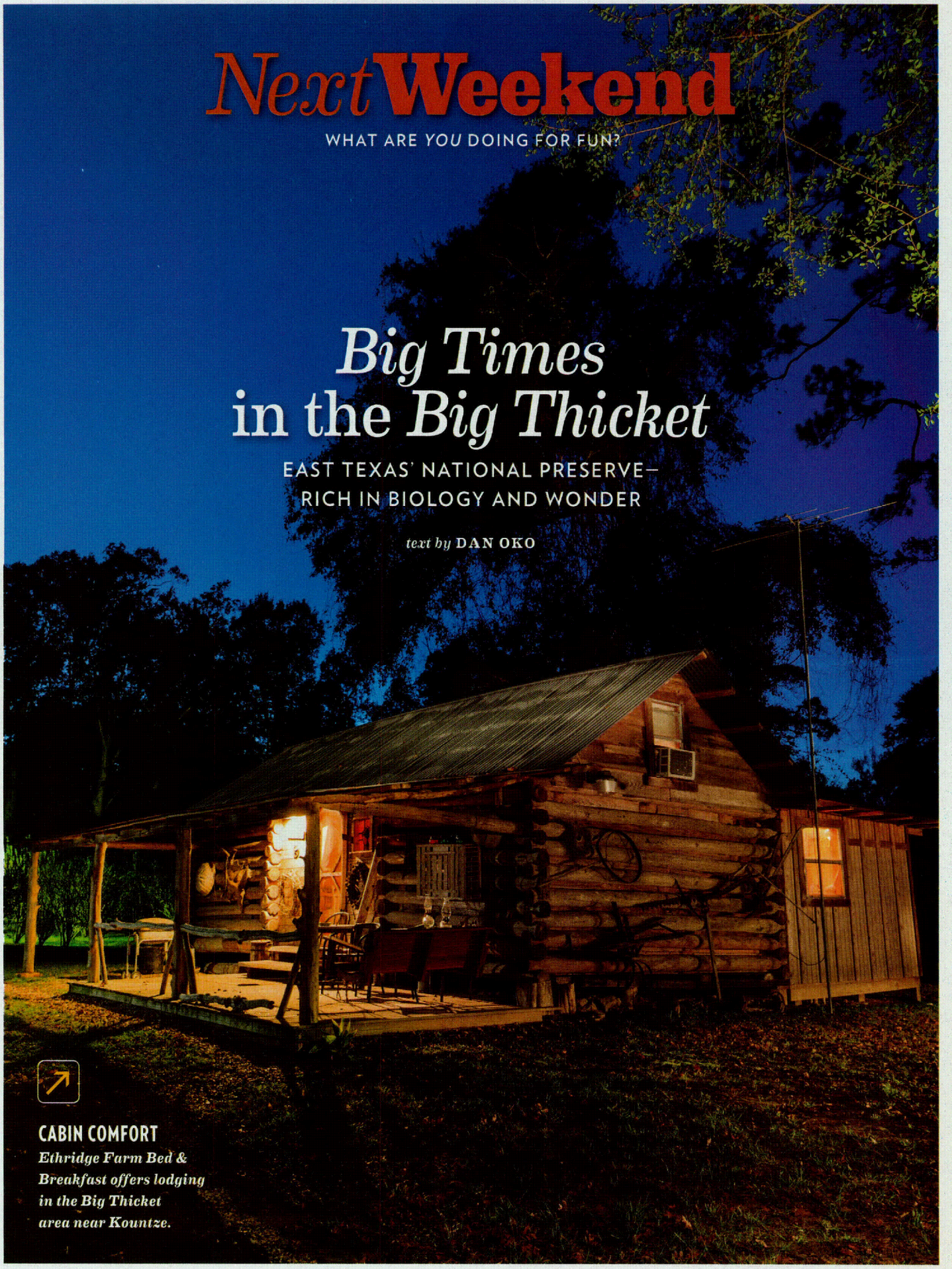
Next Weekend

WHAT ARE *YOU* DOING FOR FUN?

Big Times in the Big Thicket

EAST TEXAS' NATIONAL PRESERVE— RICH IN BIOLOGY AND WONDER

text by **DAN OKO**

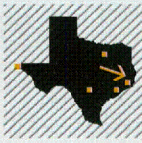


CABIN COMFORT
Ethridge Farm Bed & Breakfast offers lodging in the Big Thicket area near Kountze.

PHOTO: © Erich Schlegel

PARK IT HERE
Village Creek State Park is a popular and convenient base for exploring Big Thicket National Preserve. The preserve itself offers back-country camping, but has no developed campgrounds.

The DISTANCE to KOUNTZE



Beaumont	Houston	Dallas	San Antonio	El Paso
25 miles; 30 minutes	90 miles; 1.5 hours	265 miles; 4 hours	280 miles; 4.25 hours	830 miles; 11.5 hours

SUNSHINE BEAMS DOWN THROUGH the limbs of soaring bald cypress trees as though the light has been filtered by the stained glass of a grand European cathedral. Then I hear the bark-like chuckle of a pileated woodpecker. Two swift knocks follow from a nearby tree, and I raise my binoculars expectantly to scan the canopy for a positive identification.

Still, because I am exploring the Big Thicket National Preserve, a part of me wants to be wrong about this pileated; the Big Thicket, which comprises more than 112,000 acres in seven East Texas counties, was one of the last known haunts of the ivory-billed woodpecker, formerly North America's largest woodpecker. Today, the bird is believed by many to be extinct.

There are other woodpeckers and plenty of wildlife to be found in the Big Thicket. With 15 parcels spanning sandy-soiled pine forests, swampy oxbow lakes, and jungle-like groves of palmetto, it is a woodsy haven for hikers, paddlers, and eco-enthusiasts as well. Birders are drawn by specialty species such as the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, one of an estimated 185 bird species found in the area. But the last ivory-bill in Texas was reportedly spotted by ornithologist John Dennis in 1968. Even so, occasional rumors of living ivory-bills do emerge from Arkansas and Louisiana, and with its remarkable 32-inch wingspan and quasi-mythical significance, I cannot resist hoping for a miracle sighting.

THE BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE VISITOR CENTER is at 6102 FM 420, about eight miles north of Kountze and 30 miles north of Beaumont. Call 409/951-6700; www.nps.gov/bith.

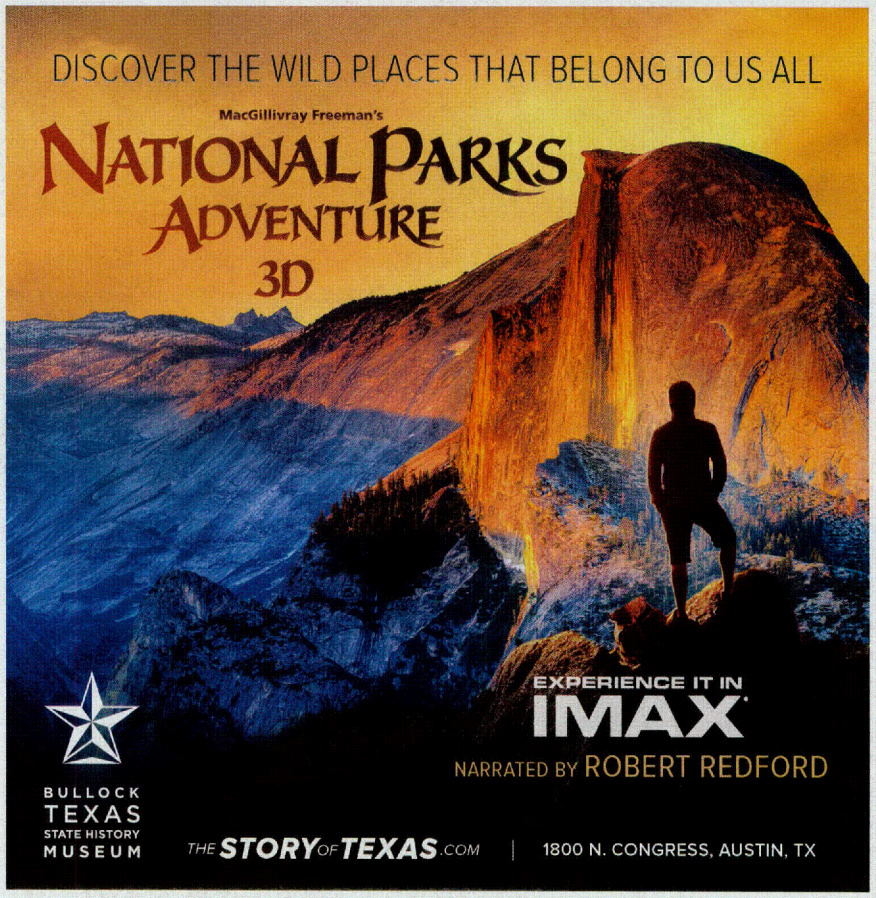
PHOTO © Erich Schlegel

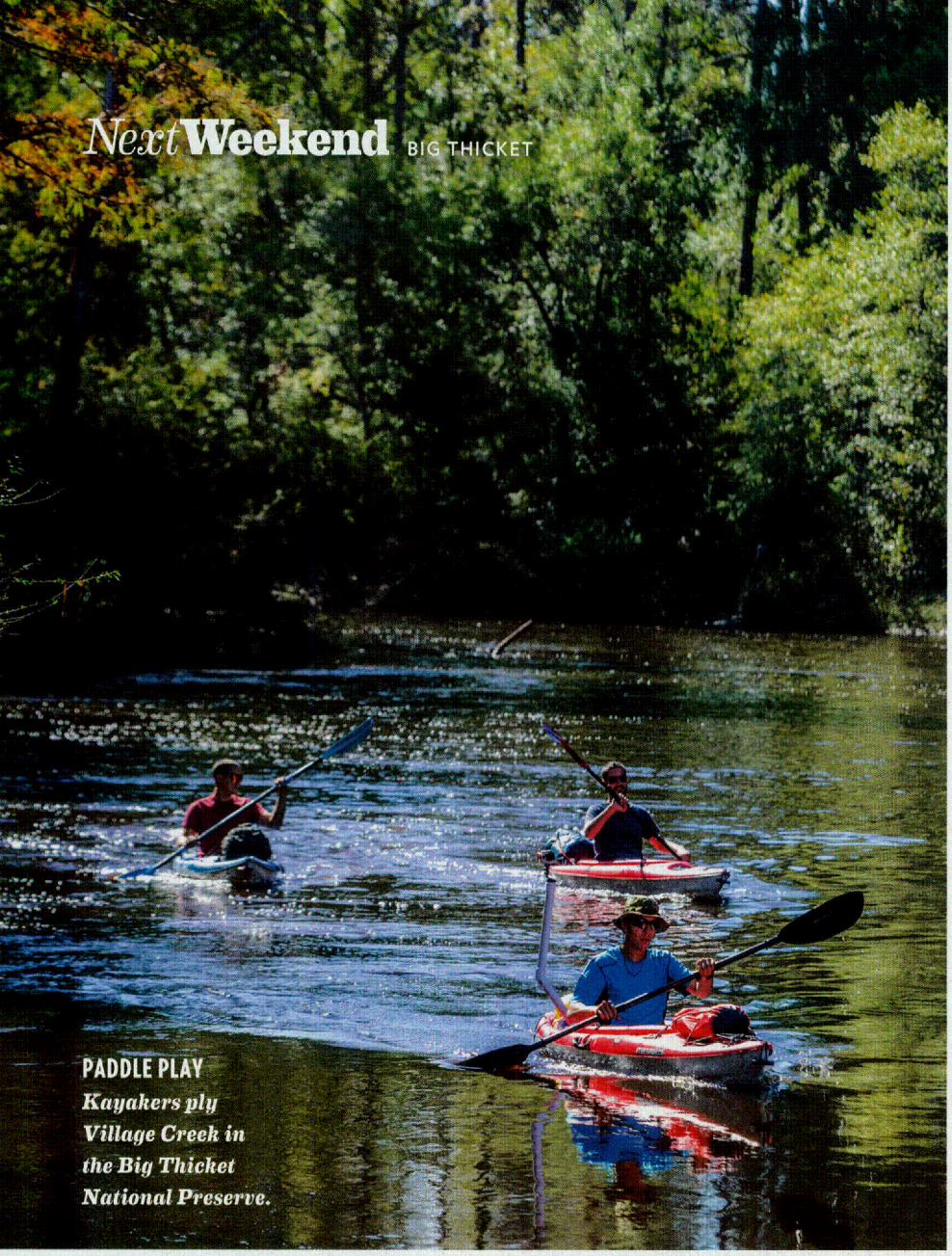
Dennis, who died in 2002, suffered miserable slings and arrows half a century ago when ivory-bill skeptics caught wind of his claim. I am spared that fate once I confirm that I have indeed spotted a pileated—a striking crow-sized bird that some say was the model for the 1940s cartoon *Woody Woodpecker*.

The fact that Dennis' woodpecker sighting was never certified did not stop a loyal group of East Texas nature-lovers from ultimately convincing the U.S. Congress to protect the Big Thicket. As early as the 1920s, local activists realized that logging and petroleum development were wreaking havoc across the Big Thicket, a regional wilderness that scientists estimate originally covered 3.5 million acres. Thanks to those early Texas activists, the preserve is now a unit of the National Park Service. Cut down to size by industry and settlements, the Big Thicket remains one of the nation's most diverse ecosystems—a zone where plants and animals still thrive in such abundance that these pockets have been nicknamed "America's Ark." As part of the National Park Service 2016 centennial, Big Thicket National Preserve has launched a series of commemorative activities such as a photo contest and ranger-led outdoor programs, including night hikes and exploration into remote areas of the preserve.

"Our goal is to create the next generation of advocates," explains Ranger Josh Stringer. Stringer is especially excited about the opportunity for kids to take part in the yearlong "Centennial Forest" program, which will help to restore bug- and hurricane-damaged woodlands by planting 100,000 longleaf pine seedlings in the winter and fall. "The core of our visitation is local, but it's a great opportunity to show everyone the resource and why it's important."

Stringer spoke to me at the Big Thicket Visitor Center, located about eight miles north of Kountze. With its comprehensive museum-quality science displays, hands-on kids area, and racks of field guides, the center should





PADDLE PLAY
Kayakers ply Village Creek in the Big Thicket National Preserve.

be the first stop for newcomers—whether they come from across the state or around the world. (The guest register includes entries from as far away as Norway and Ireland.)

The knowledgeable park staff members can orient visitors to the 15 discrete units of the Big Thicket. The late Big Thicket activist and former *Texas Highways* contributor Howard Peacock described these as "a freewheeling version of Rorschach blotches," and sorting out an itinerary can be daunting. There are protected corridors stretching along Village Creek and the Neches River that show off remnant old-growth cypress trees and are best explored by canoe or kayak, and more than 40 miles of hiking trails that span nine biological zones. Visitors can spend days traversing longleaf pine uplands, which once covered 90 million acres nationwide, or wander swampy stands of cypress and bogs of pitcher plants and bladderworts, two of the four types of bug-eating plants found in the Thicket.

"To me, what's distinctive about the Big Thicket is that it's not about the grand, scenic views," explains veteran Ranger Mary Kay Manning, who I find behind the Visitor Center desk. "It's really about the biodiversity. We are under two migratory flyways, which make the area really popular with birders, especially during the spring migration. There's an incredible diversity of mushrooms and other fungi, in all sorts of shapes and colors. You need to go slow and look for all the little things. And the thing I tell people every day is that we are spread out."

Another difference between the Big Thicket and many other national parks, including its better-known western cousin Big Bend National Park, is that Big Thicket has no central campground or shop for general supplies. In turn, camping requires a backcountry permit (available at the Visitor Center), which can be used by paddlers or backpackers. Campers can also choose to drive an extra few miles to either scenic Martin Dies Jr. State Park or Village Creek State Park, which sandwich the preserve north and south, respectively, and share many of its charms.

In addition, it's best to pack any supplies you need before heading for the Big Thicket, though the nearby towns of Kountze, Silsbee, and Woodville—not to mention the city of Beaumont—have shops, groceries, and a selection of restaurants. On the fly, I pick up a quick and tasty burger at the Gunslinger's Grill in Silsbee, a roadside alternative to the ubiquitous franchise establishments, and then hit the trails again.

I double back to reach Sundew Trail—tucked into the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit a few miles northwest of the Visitor Center—before sundown, eager to see some of the carnivorous plants that draw so many people to the Big Thicket. There are five bug-eating plants indigenous to North America, and four of them are native to this region of East Texas. But when I get to the trail, which is named for a low-to-the-ground flora that traps ants and small flies with a sticky fluid, the namesake sundew flowers are not in bloom. Instead, I satisfy my mordant curiosity by counting pitcher plants along the one-third mile inner loop. These strange organisms resemble upright jack-in-the-pulpits and trap insects drawn by sweet nectar inside their waxy flutes.

Next, I make my way to the Ethridge Farm Bed & Breakfast outside Kountze for the night. Ann Ethridge bought the property with her husband in 1974, right around the time the park was established. They eventually built several

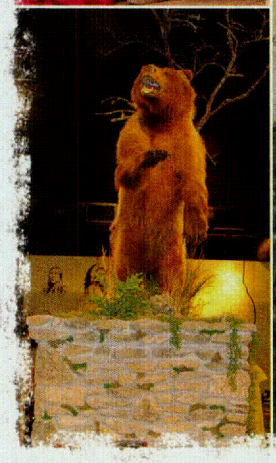
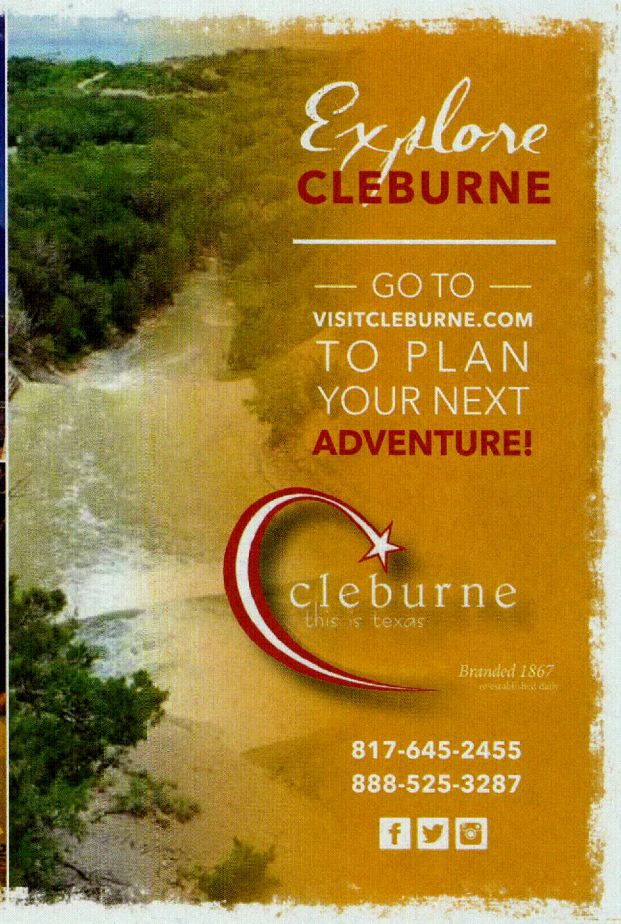
PHOTO: © Erich Schlegel

cabins amid the citrus trees they had planted, and opened to the public about a decade ago. My roomy cabin on Mayhaw Ridge has a plush, king-size bed, and it's a real pleasure to wash away the day's accumulated grime in the private outdoor shower. While sitting on the front porch, I enjoy the cool breeze but find clouds have obscured the would-be starry night, so I focus on my plans for a morning canoe trip.

The Big Thicket remains one of the nation's most diverse ecosystems—a zone where plants and animals still thrive in such abundance that these pockets have been nicknamed "America's Ark."

With my belly full of biscuits and gravy, I meet longtime outfitter Perry Humphrey, proprietor of Eastex Canoe Trails, who delivers me to Village Creek. I paddle down the languid stream and around Baby Galvez Island, a wooded pocket that splits the river channel about 10 miles north of Village Creek State Park. In summer, the area gets pretty crowded, but on this quiet autumn day, I have the river pretty much to myself. A startled family of wood ducks, colorful waterfowl that prefer hardwood forests and nest in tree cavities, raises a chorus of whistles. Too soon I discover the takeout.

As I wrap up my stopover, there is no doubt that the Big Thicket has much left to show me. But as both Ethridge and Humphrey pointed out to me independently, those old-time Texans who fought for the protection of the state's world-class woodlands recognized that this tangled, snarled, swampy landscape was irreplaceable. Even after the loss of the red wolf, the black bear, and especially the ivory-billed woodpecker—once common creatures that have been extirpated from the Big Thicket—there is a true sense of wonder to be found in these dark woods. ★

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Sandi Patty : 2/11 at The Pines

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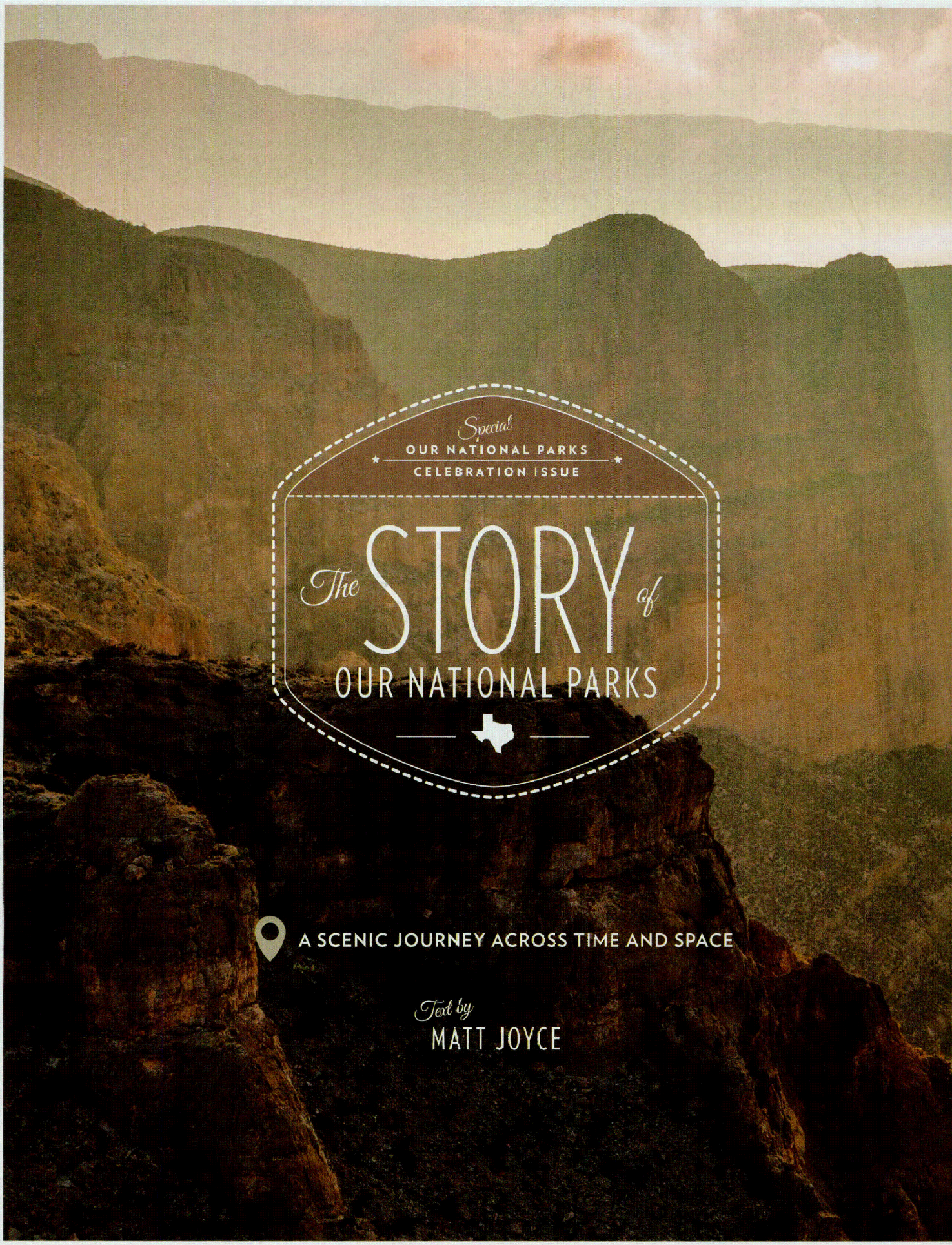
Jane Monheit : 4/7 at The Pines

PHOTO: Summit of Guadalupe Peak, Guadalupe Mountains National Park: © Laurence Parent


Special
OUR NATIONAL PARKS
CELEBRATION ISSUE
The STORY of
OUR NATIONAL PARKS
A SCENIC JOURNEY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE
Text by
MATT JOYCE

The Rio Grande in Boquillas Canyon, Big Bend National Park

PHOTO: © Laurence Parent

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
100th Anniversary

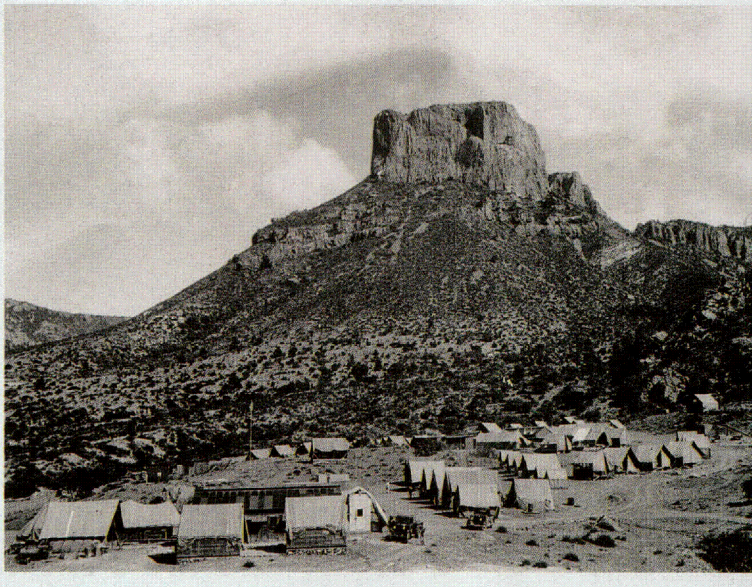
The Lone Star State was a little late to the national parks game, but as is our way, Texas jumped into the scene with a splash. The opening of Big Bend National Park in 1944 introduced the nation to a mythic new landscape—a remote Chihuahuan Desert expanse that wows not with snowy peaks and waterfalls but with coarse terrain, tenacious plants and animals, and a wild river flowing with borderland intrigue.

"It was a vision of such magnitude as to stir the sluggish soul of a Gila monster," recalled Texas Ranger Everett E. Townsend in an oft-quoted description of the view he encountered from Burro Mesa in the 1890s. "It was so awe-inspiring that it did deeply touch the soul of a hardened human bloodhound."

Big Bend was Texas' first national park, thanks to the efforts of Townsend—known as the "father" of the park—and others committed to protecting its natural wonder for the benefit of science, tourism, and posterity. In the decades since, the federal government has created 15 more national park sites across Texas, chronicling the state's widespread cultural and environmental diversity while highlighting a shared goal of preservation among far-flung communities.

The National Park Service celebrates its centennial in 2016, casting renewed attention on both the stalwarts of the system, such as Big Bend, and the most recent addition, Waco Mammoth National Monument. While the sites in Texas vary dramatically in their size and offerings, they all reflect Congress' 1916 charge to the National Park Service to preserve and interpret our nation's most significant environmental and historical places.

"The centennial is a great opportunity to highlight what we have here in Texas," says Suzanne Dixon, senior director of regional operations for the National Parks Conservation Association. "When you consider all the different park units—like Fort Davis National Historic Site, one of the best surviving examples of a



ABOVE: A Civilian Conservation Corps camp at the Chisos Basin in Big Bend, 1939. RIGHT: Big Bend bluebonnets and a fiery sunset at Big Bend National Park.

BIG BEND WAS TEXAS' FIRST NATIONAL PARK, THANKS TO THE EFFORTS OF TOWNSEND—KNOWN AS THE "FATHER" OF THE PARK—AND OTHERS COMMITTED TO PROTECTING ITS NATURAL WONDER FOR THE BENEFIT OF SCIENCE, TOURISM, AND POSTERITY.

PHOTO: Livingston Collection, Archives of the Big Bend, Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library, Sul Ross State University.

PHOTO: © Joe Lowery

To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit www.texashighwaysprints.com.

frontier Army installation in the Southwest, or the Big Thicket, the biological crossroads of America—these parks are sources of wonder and inspiration, and very valuable to our state."

Perhaps they're all the more valuable considering that Texas wasn't designed with federal land ownership in mind. Between annexation in 1845 and the Compromise of 1850, Texas gave up its claim to an extended Panhandle territory in exchange for $10 million and the retention of all of its public lands, explains Neel Baumgardner, a historian at the University of Texas-San Antonio. (Now, the federal government owns less than 2 percent of land in Texas, much less than in Western states famous for their national parks, such as the 48 percent in Wyoming and 30 percent in Montana.)

"For Texas to have a national park, first you had to have federal land, which meant somebody had to buy it and then cede it back to the federal government," says Baumgardner, author of the forthcoming book *Unbordering North America: Constructing International Parks Along the Periphery of Canada, Mexico, and the United States*. "So that's the primary reason it took so very long for Texas to get a national park."

The country's first national parks actually preceded the creation of the Park Service—Hot Springs in Arkansas in 1832 and Yellowstone in Wyoming in 1872, among others. Meanwhile in Texas, Townsend, who by 1933 was a state legislator from Brewster County, supported legislation that year to create a state park in the Big Bend area, while in 1935 Congress passed legislation allowing for the establishment of Big Bend National Park. In 1941, the Texas Legislature allocated $1.5 million to buy about 700,000 acres for the park, and on June 6, 1944, a delegation of Texans delivered the deed for the parkland to President Franklin Roosevelt. In the meantime, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the first bones of the park's infrastructure, including roads and water wells.

"A lot of states wanted a national park to drive tourism, to drive revenue," Baumgardner says. "The folks who were pushing for the legislation really tried to underscore the economic benefits—people driving to parks would be spending money on lodging and gas taxes in communities all over the state."

Developers of Big Bend National Park benefitted from broad support among the surrounding communities and

ABOVE: A pitcher plant on the Pitcher Plant Trail at Big Thicket National Preserve. RIGHT: Ferns and pine trees in the Big Thicket.

"WHEN YOU CONSIDER ALL THE DIFFERENT PARK UNITS—LIKE FORT DAVIS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, ONE OF THE BEST SURVIVING EXAMPLES OF A FRONTIER ARMY INSTALLATION IN THE SOUTHWEST, OR THE BIG THICKET, THE BIOLOGICAL CROSSROADS OF AMERICA—THESE PARKS ARE SOURCES OF WONDER AND INSPIRATION, AND VERY VALUABLE TO OUR STATE."

PHOTO: © Erich Schlegel

PHOTO: Stan A. Williams

at the state government. In East Texas, the backers of another "Big" park faced a more contentious process as they sought to protect a biologically rich chunk of pine forest, sandhills, hardwood river bottoms, and southeastern swamps. The concept of creating a Big Thicket national park first emerged in the 1930s, but with complications including World War II, the creation of national forests in the area, and opposition from the timber industry, it wasn't until 1974 that Congress established the Big Thicket National Preserve.

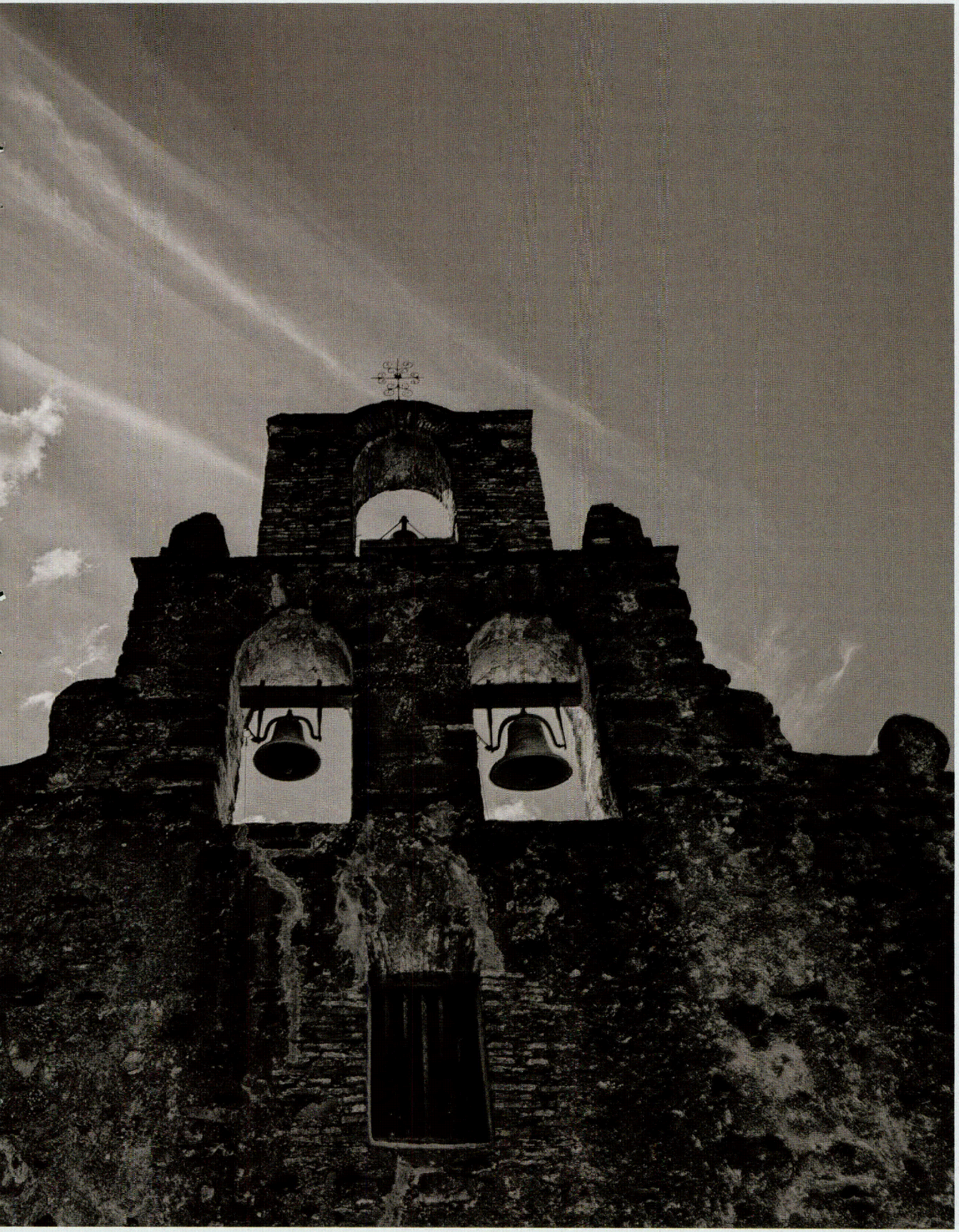
Advocates for protecting Big Thicket note its environmental importance as a natural melting pot with ecological elements from places as varied as the Appalachian Mountains, the Florida Everglades, and the Desert Southwest. Without protection, the forest "could have been impacted by urban development, agriculture, forestry (read pine farms), incursion of highways, reservoirs, and more," says Maxine Johnston, who's been a member of the Big Thicket Association since it formed in 1964. "Further, the preserve provides an outdoor laboratory for research as well as economic benefits from visitation."

For sure, the people of Texas and beyond embrace the Big Thicket National Preserve for all of those

ABOVE: A 1919 photo of the Rose Window at Mission San José in San Antonio. The Works Progress Administration reconstructed the crumbling Mission San José in the 1930s. RIGHT: Mission Espada in San Antonio.

AS PART OF THE PARK SERVICE, THE MISSIONS PRESERVE THE OLD ADOBE AND LIMESTONE CHURCH COMPOUNDS AND INTERPRET THEIR INFLUENCE IN RELIGION, FARMING, IRRIGATION, AND LIVESTOCK.

PHOTO: Ernst Wilhelm Raba, UNT Libraries, Portal to Texas History. San Antonio Conservation Society.



reasons—as well as for the way the old-growth forests provide a link to our ancestors, who roamed these same woods in the earliest days of Texas' settlement.

In San Antonio, the connection to our forebears is readily apparent at the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, a collection of four missions built by Spanish missionaries along the San Antonio River in the 1700s. (The Alamo, which is owned by the state, is not part of the park.) Missions San José, Espada, San Juan, and Concepción became part of the National Park Service in 1978 under an agreement that allowed the Catholic Archdiocese to continue operating active parishes at each site. As part of the Park Service, the missions preserve the old adobe and limestone church compounds and interpret their influence in religion, farming, irrigation, and livestock.

With new discoveries come new opportunities for the National Park Service to join with Texas communities to explore history and preserve it for future generations. Among the newest is in Waco, where the 1978 discovery of a mammoth bone sparked an excavation that to date has revealed the bones of 24 Columbian mammoths. Paleontologists believe most of those mammoths were from a nursery herd made up of females and their young that were buried in a flood 65,000 years ago. Local citizens worked for years with Baylor University and the city of Waco to acquire, excavate, and protect the fossils and the dig site, which opened to the public in 2009. Their efforts led to President Barack Obama's designation of the Waco Mammoth National Monument last July.

"I think from the beginning the community has just been in love with the mammoths," marvels Gayle Lacy, president of the Waco Mammoth Foundation, a nonprofit that raised $4.2 million to build the site's dig shelter. "We realized how unique it was, and we wanted to protect what was found. We are behind it 100 percent."

Well said. What's not to love about mammoths—or visiting a national park? ★

ABOVE: The dig site display at Waco Mammoth National Monument. RIGHT: Photos from 1936 and today of Fort Davis' officer's row, originally built in the 1870s. The National Park Service restored officer's row in the 1960s, shortly after Fort Davis became a National Historic Site in 1961.

Know the Numbers

Establishment dates for Texas' national parks

Big Bend NP	1935
Fort Davis NHS	1961
Padre Island NS	1962
Alibates Flint Quarries NM	1965
Lake Meredith NRA	1965
Amistad NRA	1965
Chamizal National Memorial	1966
Guadalupe Mountains NP	1966
Lyndon B. Johnson NHP	1969
Big Thicket National Preserve	1974
Palo Alto Battlefield NHP	1978
Rio Grande Wild & Scenic River	1978
San Antonio Missions NHP	1978
El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro	2000
El Camino Real de los Tejas	2004
Waco Mammoth NM	2015

Source: National Park Service/National Parks Conservation Association

2014 attendance at Texas' national parks

San Antonio Missions NHP	1,395,337
Amistad NRA	1,310,096
Lake Meredith NRA	692,195
Padre Island NS	578,815
Big Bend NP	314,102
Guadalupe Mtns NP	166,868
Big Thicket National Preserve	109,956
Chamizal National Memorial	108,399
Lyndon B. Johnson NHP	88,427
Fort Davis NHS	49,842
Palo Alto Battlefield NHP	41,516
Waco Mammoth Site	21,739
Alibates Flint Quarries NM	4,513
Rio Grande Wild & Scenic River	321

Source: National Park Service/Waco Mammoth NM

WITH NEW DISCOVERIES COME NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO JOIN WITH TEXAS COMMUNITIES TO EXPLORE HISTORY AND PRESERVE IT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

PHOTO: Will van Overbeek

PHOTOS (from top): Marvin Eickenroht, Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress; © Laurence Parent

Preserving
the BIG
THICKET

Special

OUR NATIONAL PARKS CELEBRATION ISSUE

NATIONAL PARK PERKS

SPECIAL EVENTS SPICE UP THE CENTENNIAL.

Every corner of the state—from the Big Bend to the Big Thicket, and Padre Island to the Panhandle's Lake Meredith—is home to spectacular getaways and historic places worthy of national notice. If you haven't visited some of the Lone Star State's national parks and historic sites before, or haven't been in a while, the National Park Service Centennial celebration adds special events to the many reasons to explore these places in 2016.

Text by ERIN INKS AND JULIE STRATTON
Illustrations by MICHAEL CRAMPTON

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
100th Anniversary

PLANT A TREE.

Big Thicket National Preserve north of Beaumont has set a goal of planting 100,000 longleaf pine seedlings for the 100th anniversary this year, replacing hundreds of acres lost to logging, pine beetle infestations, and hurricanes. The effort will require the green thumbs of numerous volunteers, who are encouraged to sign up for planting days January through March and again in November and December. Each volunteer gets a chance to plant multiple trees using tools provided to punch a hole in the dirt and drop in a seedling.

"We hope families can come out—the adults can make the hole and the kids can drop in the tree since they're closer to the ground," says Ken Hyde, chief of resource management at Big Thicket National Preserve. One day of planting trees has the potential to create a lifelong connection to the park—longleaf pine trees can live for more than 300 years and take half that time to reach their full height between 80 and 100 feet. They're also part of an ecosystem that supports endangered species such as red-cockaded woodpeckers and Texas trailing phlox flowers.

To sign up for tree planting, call the Big Thicket Visitor Center at **409/951-6700**. Even if you miss the chance to get your hands dirty, visitors to the park through the year can participate in the Share Your Thicket Photo Contest to showcase their skills and the beauty of the forest. Participants must be amateur photographers, take photos within the park, and upload them to Instagram tagged with #BigThicketPhotoContest. Winners are chosen monthly, with a grand-prize winner selected in the fall.

CELEBRATE SOMETHING BIG.

Texas' largest national park—Big Bend National Park—has some big celebrations planned for the NPS centennial, including four days of festivities before Memorial Day and the grand-opening celebration of the new Fossil Discovery Exhibit in September.

"The emphasis of the NPS centennial celebrations is to show people a lot of great options in their own backyards," says Courtney Lyons-Garcia, executive director of the Big Bend Conservancy, a partner with Big Bend National Park. Big Bend's National Park Service Centennial Celebration, May 26-29, provides opportunities to experience tours and talks that highlight some of the most interesting aspects of the park, along with the conservancy's contributions, taking a different focus each day.

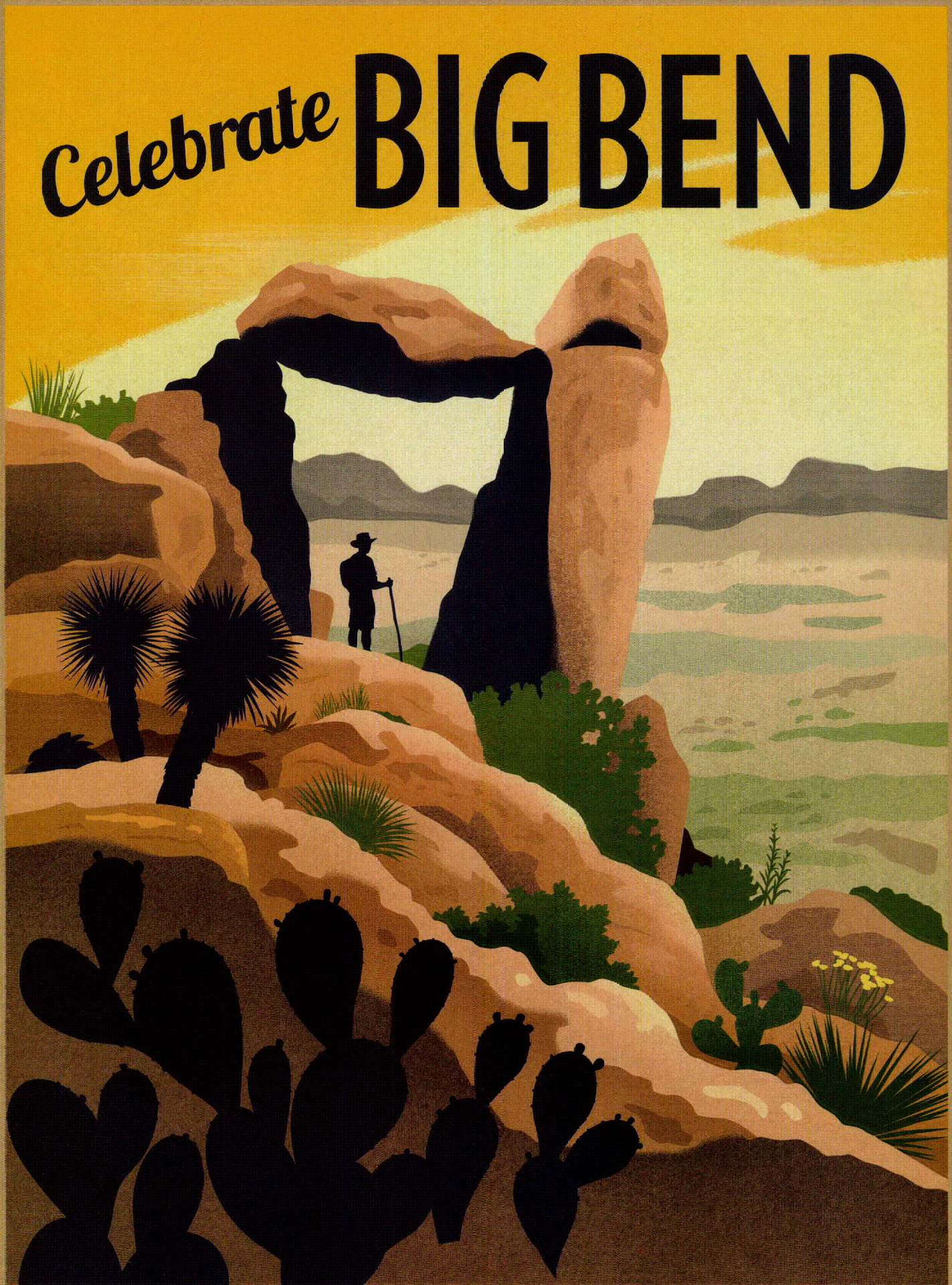
Activities kick off 9 a.m. Thursday, May 26, with a talk about the international mining history along the border, plus a discussion of the relationship with Mexico and the conservancy's role in raising funds for the park's Border Crossing Station. The event concludes with a trip across the border to Boquillas, Mexico (bring passport and spending money), led by the park staff and conservancy directors.

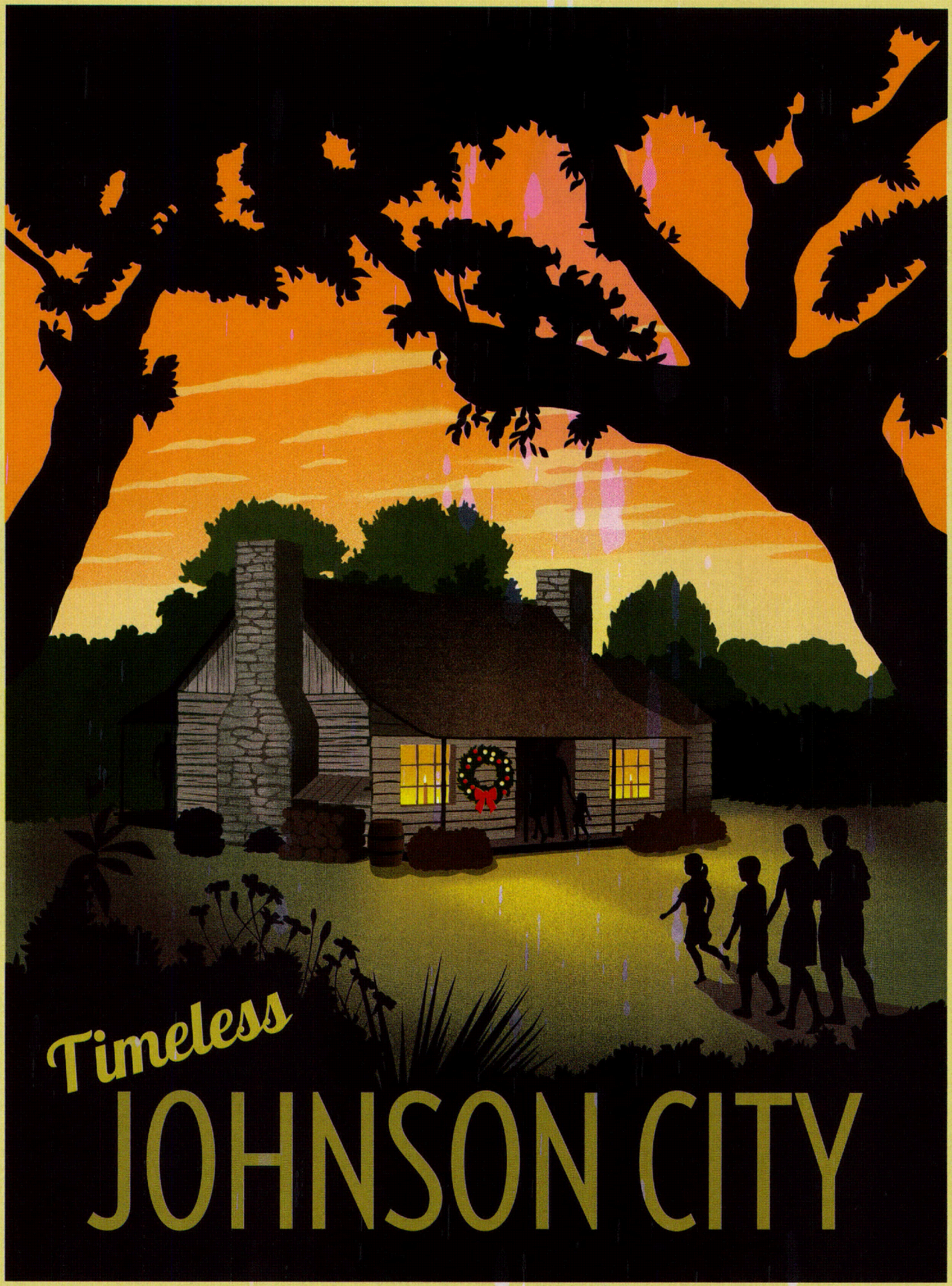
On Friday evening, May 27, celebrate the NPS 100th birthday and the Big Bend Conservancy's 20th birthday with a 6:30 p.m. party at Chisos Mountains Lodge. Later, at 10:15 p.m., bring binoculars to Route 13 (the road from Panther Junction to Rio Grande Village), Mile 15.3, for the don't-miss night-sky viewing and discussion. Saturday, May 28, starts with an early-morning hike in the Chisos Basin, and wrap-up Sunday with an 8:30 a.m. Wetlands Wonders BioBlitz, which includes a birding walk, wildlife spotting, and wetlands restoration discussion. All events within the park are free and open to the public, and the schedule of activities provides plenty of free time to explore the park's more than 800,000 acres on your own.

On September 24, the park plans a grand-opening celebration of its new Fossil Discovery Exhibit. The exhibit was completed as a "centennial challenge," a government initiative that encouraged public-private partnerships on signature projects in national parks to celebrate the NPS anniversary. The park and conservancy partnered to build the exhibit, which will explore Big Bend's paleontological and geological past in a $1.35 million open-air pavilion about 20 miles inside the park from the US 385 entrance.

The pavilion will encompass three rooms, with two side rooms providing self-guided interpretation of the park's four past environments—marine, coastal plain, inland floodplain, and volcanic highlands—and a classroom in the center. The exhibit rooms will contain life-size replicas of fossils found within Big Bend, including the park's most recent dinosaur discovery—the skull of a Bravoceratops *polyphemus*—which, for the near future, can only be seen here. The rooms will also feature illustrations, diagrams, and text connecting the fossils with geological formations visible from the site.

A replica skeleton of a pterosaur Quetzacoatlus, the largest flying creature ever found, will hang from the ceiling of the classroom, where visitors will gather for presentations, such as a ranger-led discussion of the exhibits, and learn about new finds. In addition, a new website (scheduled to debut in February; **www.fossildiscoveryexhibit.com**) will share information on findings and research.


Celebrate
BIG BEND


Timeless
JOHNSON CITY

"We're working hard to make this a place families can enjoy together," says Lyons-Garcia, noting that the exhibit may draw visitors who aren't big hikers and campers, and that it can inspire greater exploration of the park. For Big Bend National Park, visit **www.nps.gov/bibe**; Big Bend Conservancy, visit **www.bigbendfriends.org**.

EXPLORE THE CONNECTIONS.

The Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin takes a special look at Texas' first national park with the *Journey into Big Bend* exhibit from April 22 to September 19. The exhibit will display photography, personal artifacts, and personal reflections regarding the park, along with monthly, curated selections from a social media photography contest on the museum's website.

"Big Bend means something personal to the people who visit there, work there, and live in the area," says Margaret Cook, deputy director of the Bullock Museum. "The exhibit will seek to explore what connects the park to the people who love it."

Contemporary and archival photographs of the park will line the walls of the rotunda gallery on the museum's third floor, where visitors can also see displays of artifacts, such as fossils and tools, and listen to audio interviews.

In addition to the exhibit, the Bullock IMAX Theatre will present MacGillivray Freeman's *National Parks Adventure 3-D* for a year, beginning February 21, offering an exploration of the wild, untamed spaces that are preserved in America's national parks. **Call 512/936-8746; www.thestoryoftexas.com.**

BLAZE A TRAIL.

Near Austin, McKinney Falls State Park will host a Centennial Celebration to coincide with National Trails Day on June 4, highlighting the park's place on the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail. Park visitors may be familiar with the worn path on the limestone slab headed toward the namesake falls, but contrary to popular belief, it didn't originate with modern-day hikers and swimmers—it's a swale, or rut carved in the limestone over hundreds of years by travelers on the El Camino Real. Settler and horse breeder Thomas McKinney built his homestead in the 1840s next to where the trail crosses Onion Creek, leaving behind the stone ruins that can be seen along the park's Homestead Trail today.

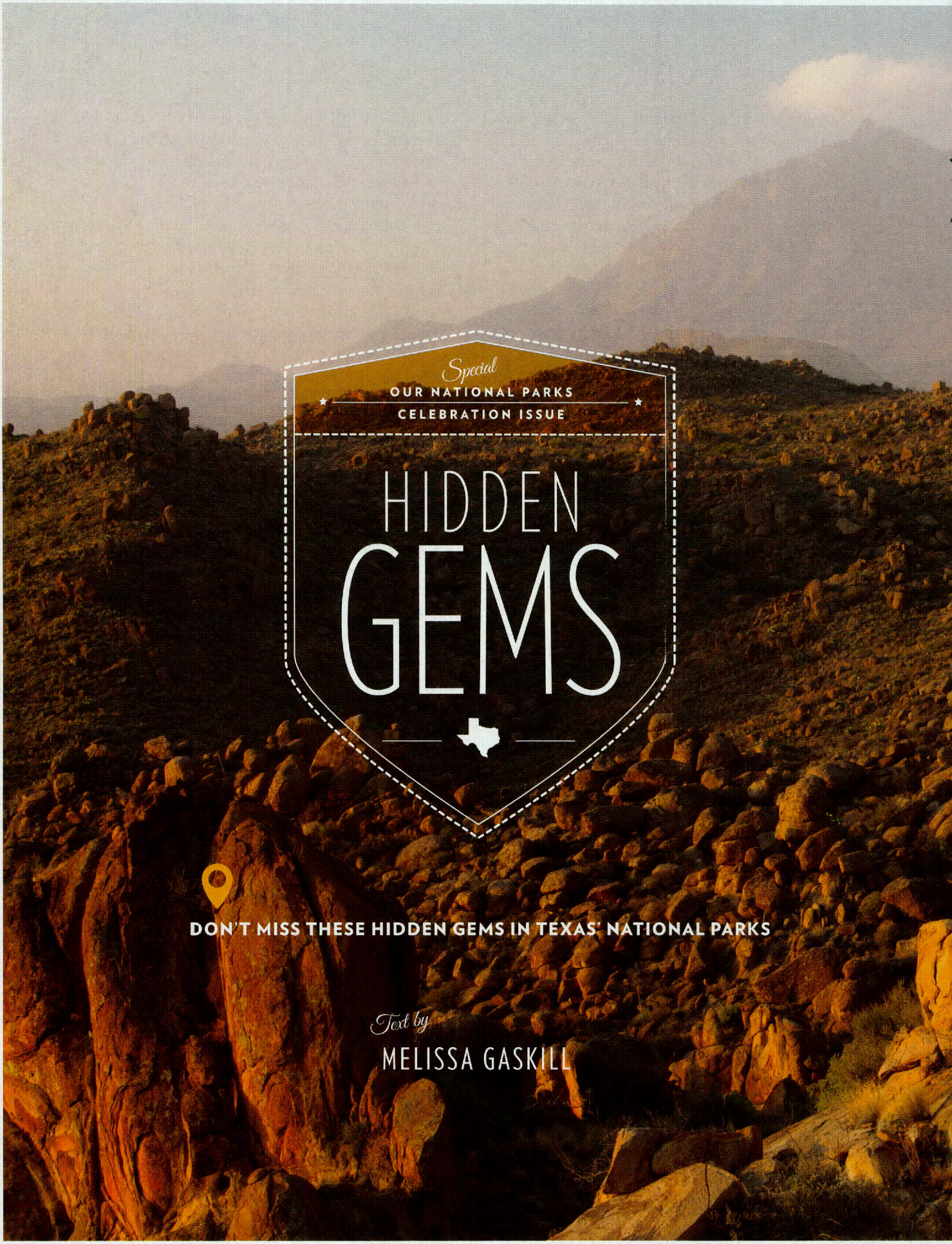
"Multiple routes of the Camino Real came together at that crossing," says Steven Gonzales, executive director of the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Association. "It's very important because it's publicly accessible, which is extremely rare for this trail." During the Spanish colonial era, the Camino ran from Mexico City to Louisiana, linking Spanish missions and settlements along the way. Despite traversing a huge swath across Texas from San Augustine to the Rio Grande, more than 99 percent of land that the trail crossed is now privately owned, effectively hiding it from public view. Gonzales says additional plans are in the works to open up a recently purchased trail site in East Texas as a historical park later in 2016. Find event information at **512/850-9073; www.elcaminorealdelostejas.org**. More on McKinney Falls State Park at **www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/mckinney-falls**.

SEE THE LIGHTS.

Each November, Resaca de la Palma Battlefield in Brownsville honors soldiers from both sides of the Mexican-American War with a Memorial Illumination event around Veterans Day. The second major battle of the war was fought on this stretch of the Rio Grande on May 9, 1846, with American forces pushing the Mexican army back in an effort to claim the Rio Grande as Texas' southern border. The warm glow of each of the 8,000 luminarias in the field at dusk represents an American or Mexican soldier who fought in the area. The event includes living-history programs featuring camp life, weapons, and drills before the ceremony. Visitors are encouraged to bring long-barreled grill lighters to help light the luminarias. **Call 956/541-2785 ext. 333; www.nps.gov/paal.**

TRAVEL IN TIME.

Decades before Lyndon B. Johnson became a U.S. president, he was the son of a state legislator in small-town Johnson City, named for his forebears. The Victorian home he grew up in is restored to its 1920s appearance as part of the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park. During "A Timeless Christmas in Johnson City" each December, the home takes on a cheery air as it's decorated in homespun holiday finery, including a modest tree and gifts on display. Visitors also can take a short walk (less than a mile) along a lighted path to visit the older Johnson Settlement, which conjures a candlelit 1860s Christmas that would have been familiar to LBJ's grandfather and great uncle as they built their cattle business here. This annual tradition is set for 6-9 p.m. on December 3 this year—more information is available at **www.nps.gov/lyjo**. To make a day of it, travelers can also visit the park's LBJ Ranch unit about 15 minutes away in Stonewall, which offers a self-guided tour of the president's birthplace and the "Texas White House." ★



Special

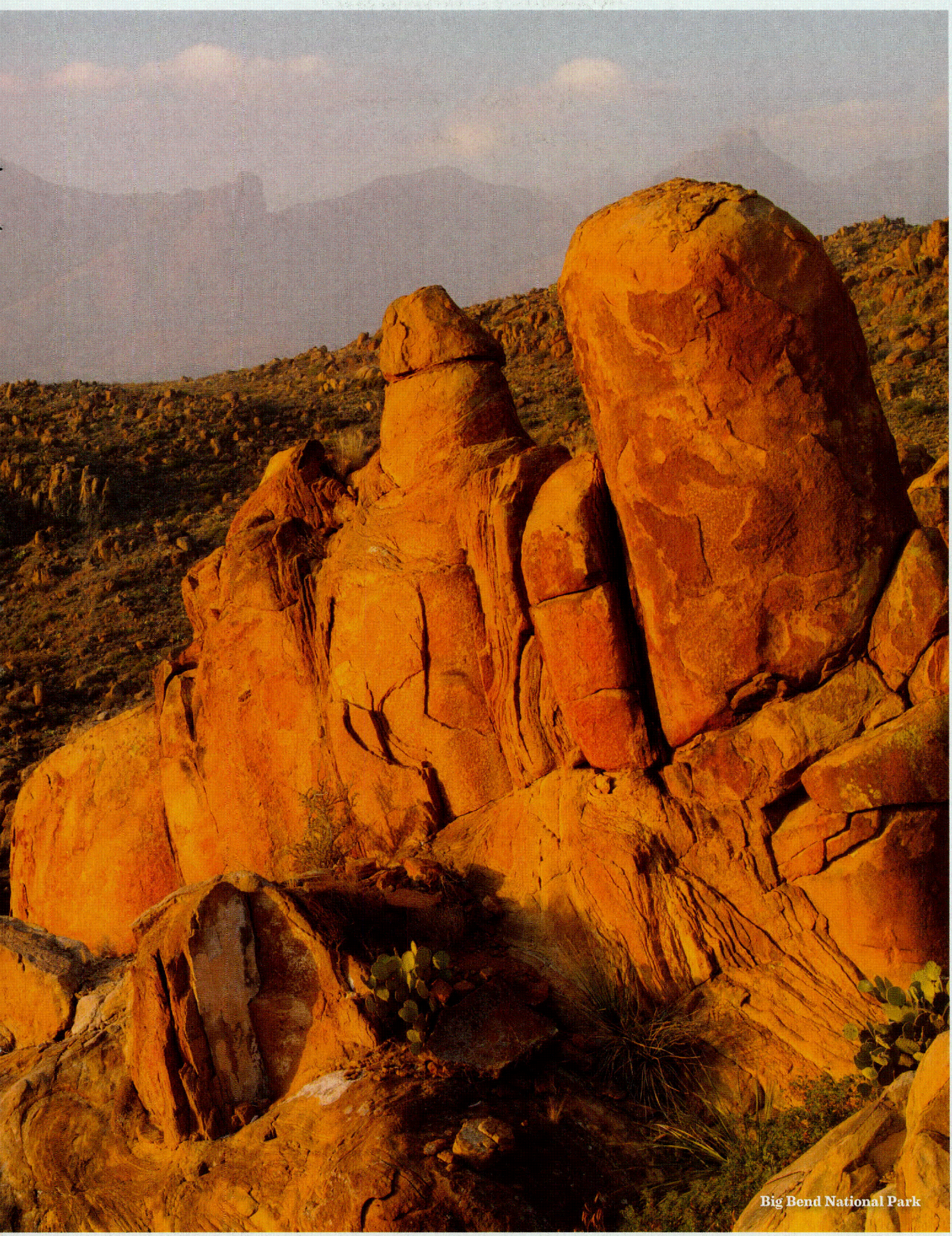
OUR NATIONAL PARKS
CELEBRATION ISSUE

HIDDEN GEMS

DON'T MISS THESE HIDDEN GEMS IN TEXAS' NATIONAL PARKS

Text by
MELISSA GASKILL

PHOTO: © Laurence Parent



Big Bend National Park

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
100th Anniversary

The National Park Service operates more than 400 sites around the country as part of its mission to preserve natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. Established in 1916, the NPS celebrates its 100th birthday this year, and everyone is invited to the party.

Big Bend became the first national park in Texas in 1935 and remained our only site until 1961, when Fort Davis joined the ranks, followed by Padre Island in 1962. Today, the state contains 16 national park service sites—a designation that includes parks, seashores, preserves, recreation areas, historical parks, memorials, monuments, and trails. In Texas, these run the gamut from windswept beaches to mountain peaks, dense forests to open prairie, structures from the 1700s to the 1960s, and tumbling rivers to placid lakes.

In short, our national park properties offer plenty of reasons to visit: camp, hike, bike, fish, swim, boat, climb, learn, re-live history, picnic, or just hang out. While most properties have a particular claim to fame—stunning natural features, for example, or interesting histories—many also offer less well-known things to do and places to see. We call these hidden gems, and here are 10 you won't want to miss.

PHOTO: Courtesy Earl Nottingham/TPWD

CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

Big Thicket National Preserve

Big Thicket National Preserve protects what is left of a landscape that once covered more than two million acres of southeast Texas. A transition zone where swamps, Eastern deciduous forests, central plains, pine savannas, and dry sandhills meet, the Big Thicket contains some of the world's greatest biological diversity: 60 mammal species, 86 reptile and amphibian species, nearly 1,800 species of butterflies and moths, at least 300 bird species, and more than a thousand species of plants.

Even more remarkable, four of North America's five carnivorous plant species live in these 112,000 acres: sundew, pitcher plants, bladderwort, and butterwort. The worts grow mostly in inaccessible swampy areas, but you can spy sundew and pitcher plants on certain trails.

The Sundew Trail, for example, is located in the tiny Hickory Creek Savannah Unit off FM 2827 between Village Mills and Warren. On this 1.5-mile route, look for dime-size red rosettes in the grass and, in summer, the tiny white or pink flowers of the sundew. These plants have sticky, knobbed hairs resembling drops of dew, which trap insects. The hairs are actually glands that produce enzymes to digest those insects.

In the preserve's Turkey Creek Unit, about 4.5 miles east of Warren, the one-mile Pitcher Plant Trail passes through a large bog where you'll see both pitcher plants and sundews. Pitcher plants have narrow, funnel-shaped leaves with rolled openings covered in a waxy substance with digestive juices at the bottom. Insects slip and fall into the funnel, where tiny hairs prevent them from climbing out.

FLINT-KNAPPING

Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument

In this site in the Panhandle north of Amarillo, bits of distinctive, colorful flint, actually a Permian-era agatized dolomite, cover 60 acres atop a mesa. Mammoth hunters came here 13,000 years ago to make tools from this unique flint, and spear tips and arrowheads hewn from this rock have been found across the Great Plains and Southwest. More than 700 hand-dug quarry pits, as well as outlines of dwellings occupied by plains people from the 1100s to the 1400s, remain visible atop the mesa. The quarries, usually oval-shaped and spreading about six feet in diameter, have mostly filled in. Some may have been dug as recently as 500 years ago.

In 1906, geologist Charles Gould came searching for oil and gas and named the area after a cowboy who showed him around, Allen "Allie" Bates. The site, soon known as "Alibates," became a national monument in 1965. Today, rangers lead tours of the quarry pits, providing details about the people who lived here and used this stone for centuries. The hike to reach the pits, about a mile round-trip, climbs about 170 feet and takes two hours. Reservations are required.

A hidden gem at this park: flint-knapping demonstrations by park volunteers and rangers. Flint-knapping refers to the process of chipping carefully away at the stone to create sharp projectile points such as arrowheads or tools such as knife blades. These demonstrations take place at the Visitor Center once or twice a week depending on season.

PANTHER CAVE

Amistad National Recreation Area

Lake Amistad straddles the United States-Mexico border near Del Rio, and the recreation area extends from just below Amistad Dam to partway up the Rio Grande, Pecos, and Devils rivers. It includes part of the 8,000-square-mile Lower Pecos Canyonlands archeological region, which contains pictographs dating back more than 4,000 years. They are some of North America's oldest and largest examples of rock art. In Panther Cave, which is managed jointly by Amistad National Recreation Area and Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site, hundreds of images cover the walls, creating a panel more than 80 feet long, along with a 10-foot-long, leaping red panther. Other images include at least four more cats and some human-like figures with complex costumes and accessories.

This truly hidden gem is accessible only by boat. A dock installed at the shelter has been temporarily removed due to low lake levels, but boaters can tie up to the rocks and clamber a few feet up to a staircase leading to a catwalk outside the cave. A fence across the cave entrance protects the paintings, and interpretive panels provide information about these pictographs, the area's prehistoric cultures, and the need to protect Panther Cave and other sites.

Seminole Canyon State Park offers another option for viewing Panther Cave: the 7.5-mile Canyon Rim Trail, which leads to Panther Cave Overlook. Bring binoculars, as the cave is across Seminole Canyon.

PHOTOS: © Laurence Parent

SUNSET AT SALT BASIN

Guadalupe Mountains National Park

Under a vast tropical ocean that once covered parts of Texas, a 400-mile-long, horseshoe-shaped reef formed more than 260 million years ago in what became far West Texas. The sea dried up, sediment covered the reef, and some 20 to 30 million years ago, tectonic pressure caused an uplift that created the Guadalupe Mountains.

Today, the park encompasses part of the Chihuahuan Desert and surrounding mountain highlands, including 8,751-foot Guadalupe Peak (the highest peak in Texas), along with numerous sheltered canyons. Visitors can enjoy more than 80 miles of trails, 10 backcountry and two developed campgrounds, springs, ruins of a stagecoach station, and a historic ranch.

Salt Basin Dunes, on the west side of the park, attract little attention but offer dramatic sunsets over gypsum and red quartz sand with the western escarpment for a backdrop. These dunes cover more than 3,500 acres and range from three-foot mounds covered in plants to 60-foot hills of bare, glistening sand. The gypsum dunes, made of a fine, snowy-white sand similar to that at White Sands National Monument in New Mexico, brilliantly reflect colors from the setting sun. From the Pine Springs Visitor Center, drive 23 miles west on Highway 62/180 and turn right on FM 1576.

In 17 miles, turn right on Williams Road and travel 7.5 miles to the parking area. Hike about a mile to the dunes, run around on the sand, and linger for the day's colorful end. Be aware that this day-use area closes 30 minutes after sunset, and you are about 50 miles from the park headquarters and more than 80 from El Paso.

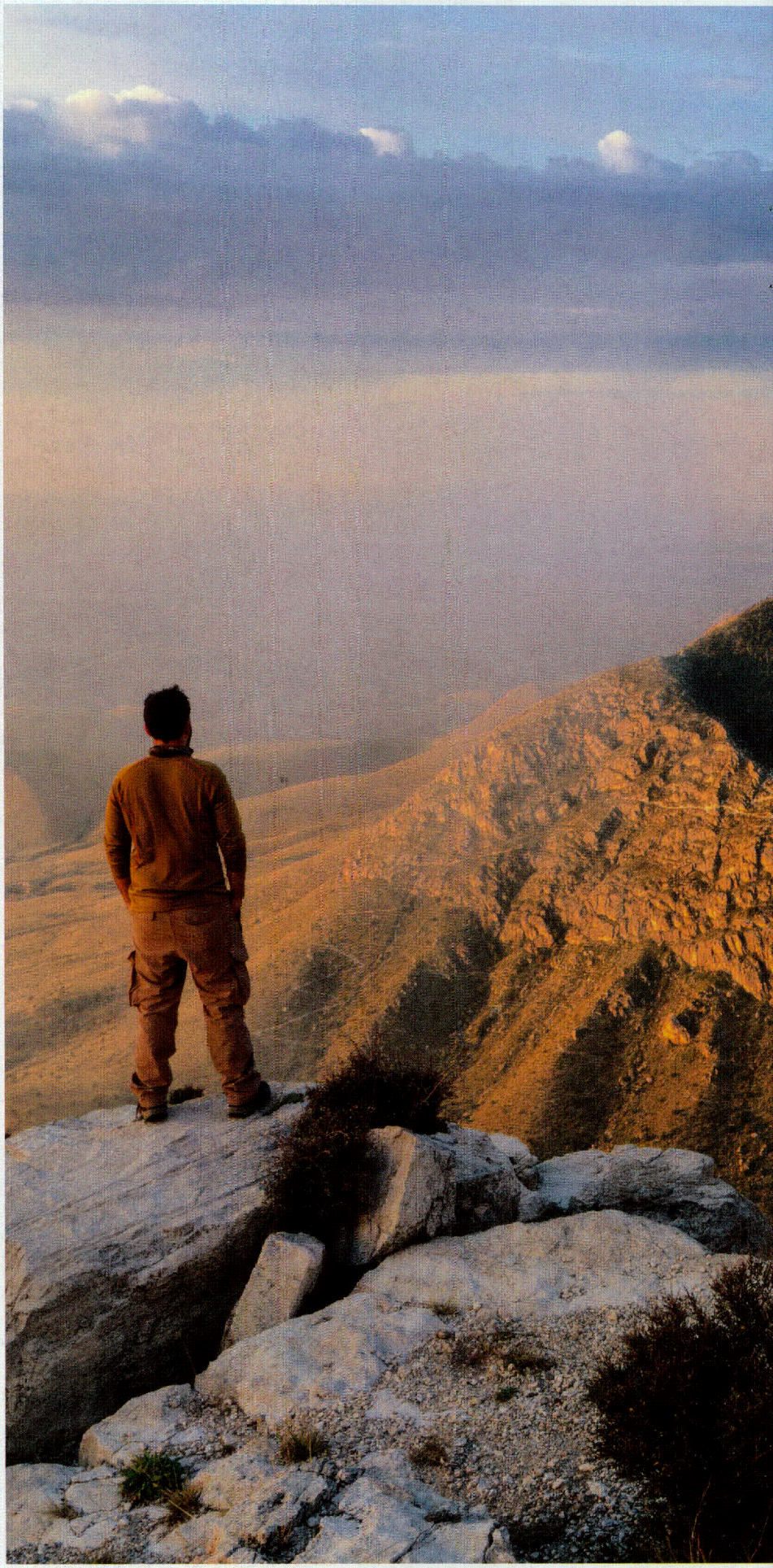
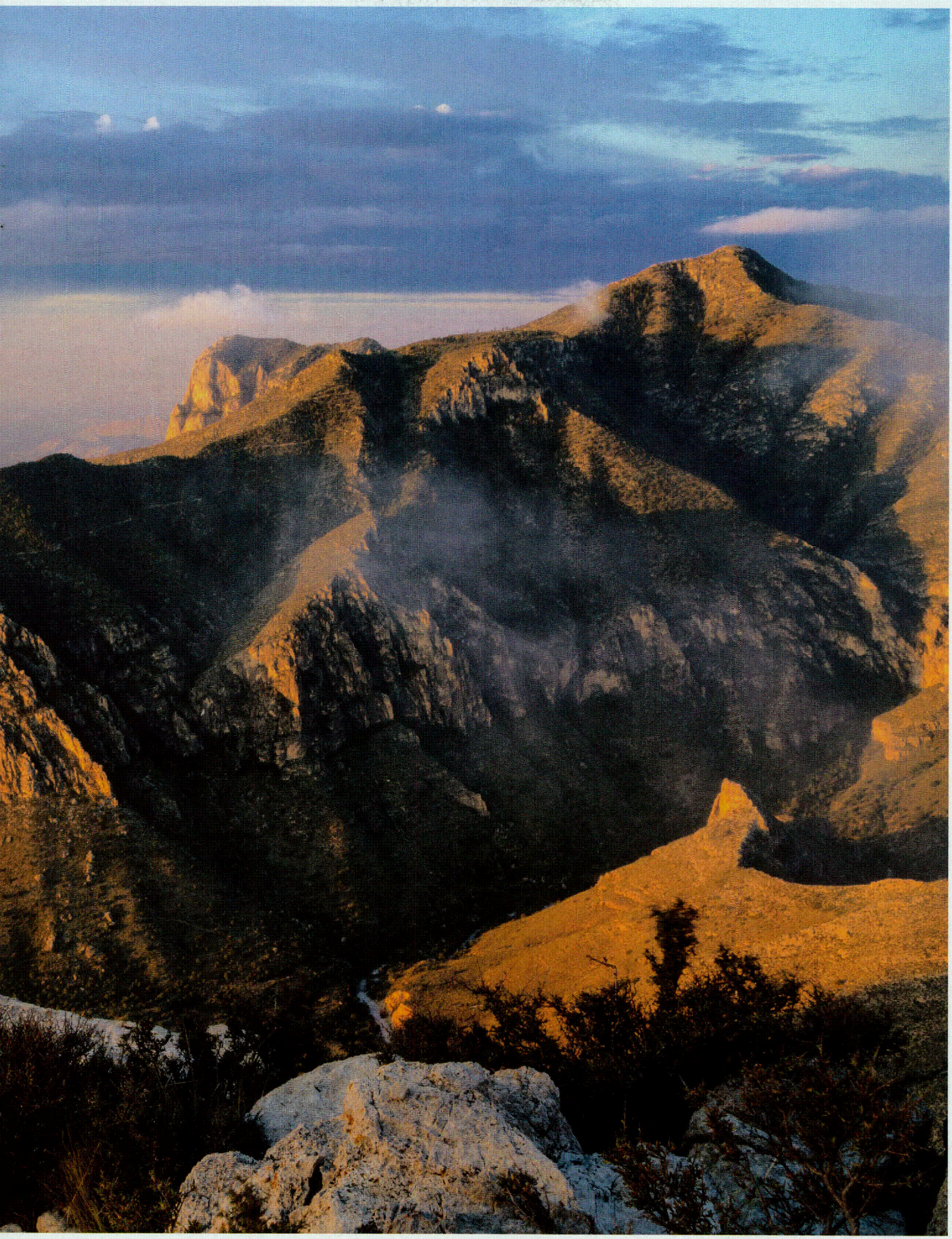
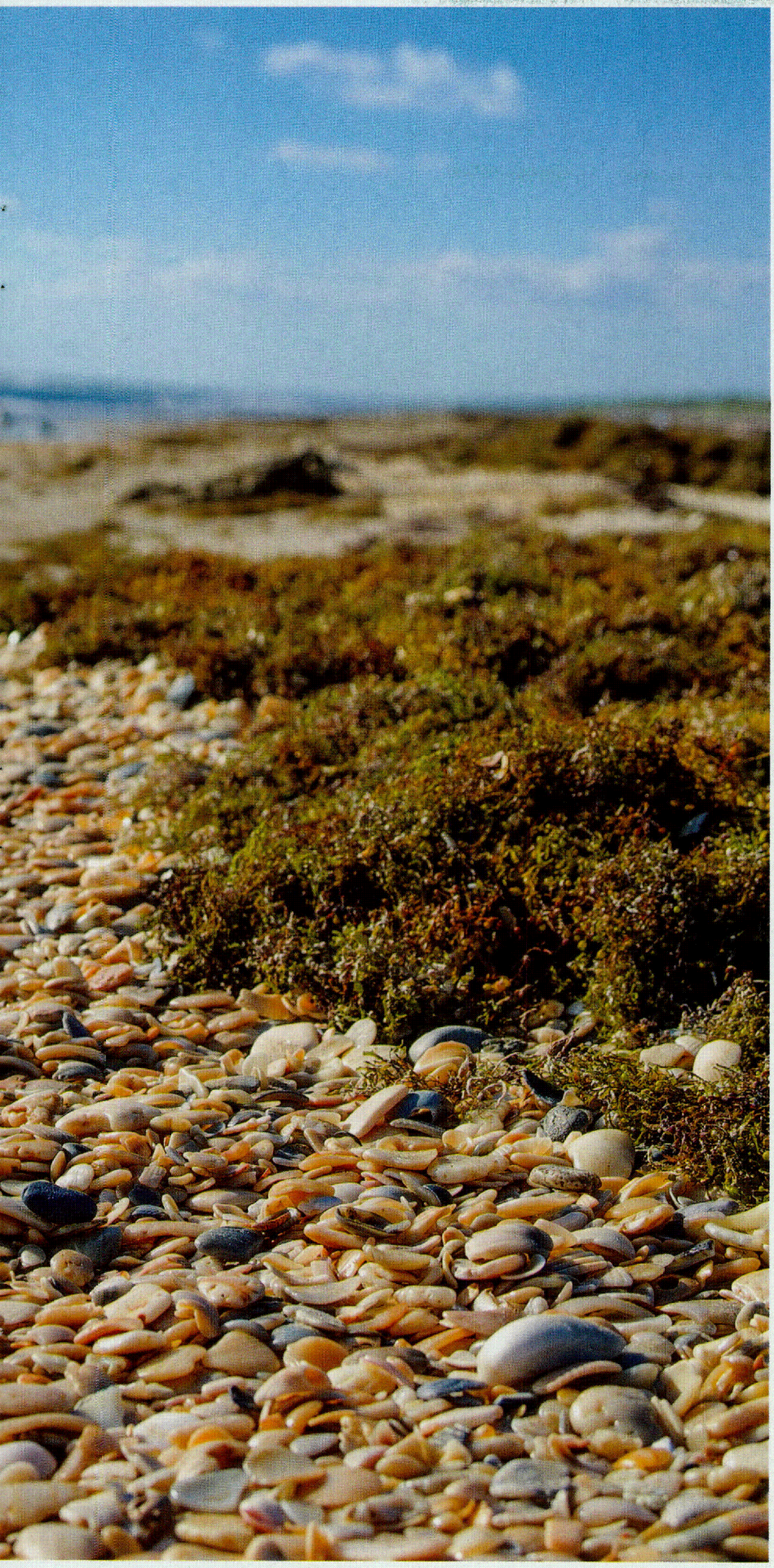


PHOTO: © Laurence Parent





BEACHCOMBING

Padre Island National Seashore

The seashore extends 70 miles, the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world. With the Gulf of Mexico on one side and the Laguna Madre on the other, the park features beach, dunes, prairies, and wind tidal flats. Before becoming a national seashore in 1962, the island served as a home for nomadic Karankawa, a stopover for Spanish explorers, a haven for shipwrecked sailors, ranch land, and a Navy bombing range. Today, it is famous for nesting Kemp's ridley sea turtles and abundant bird life.

Gulf of Mexico currents bring an astonishing variety of things onto the island's beaches, creating a veritable beachcomber's paradise. Look for seashells such as lightning whelks, the state seashell; Southern moon snails; lettered olives; and Atlantic cockles, a classic fan-shaped seashell. You also may find sea beans, driftwood, and almost every kind of human detritus from lumber to plastic buckets and bottles. Visitors can collect and take up to a five-gallon bucket of shells, as long as none of them contains a living creature. The best shelling happens after storms and on unmaintained beaches (beyond Mile Marker 5). Identify your finds with the help of free brochures and seashell guidebooks for sale in the Malaquite Visitor Center.

The Malaquite area includes restrooms, showers, a car-free stretch of beach, and a developed campground. Primitive tent and RV camping are allowed anywhere on the beach with a permit; past Mile Marker 5, you'll need a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

PHOTO: Courtesy Chase Fountain/TPWD

STARGAZING

Big Bend National Park

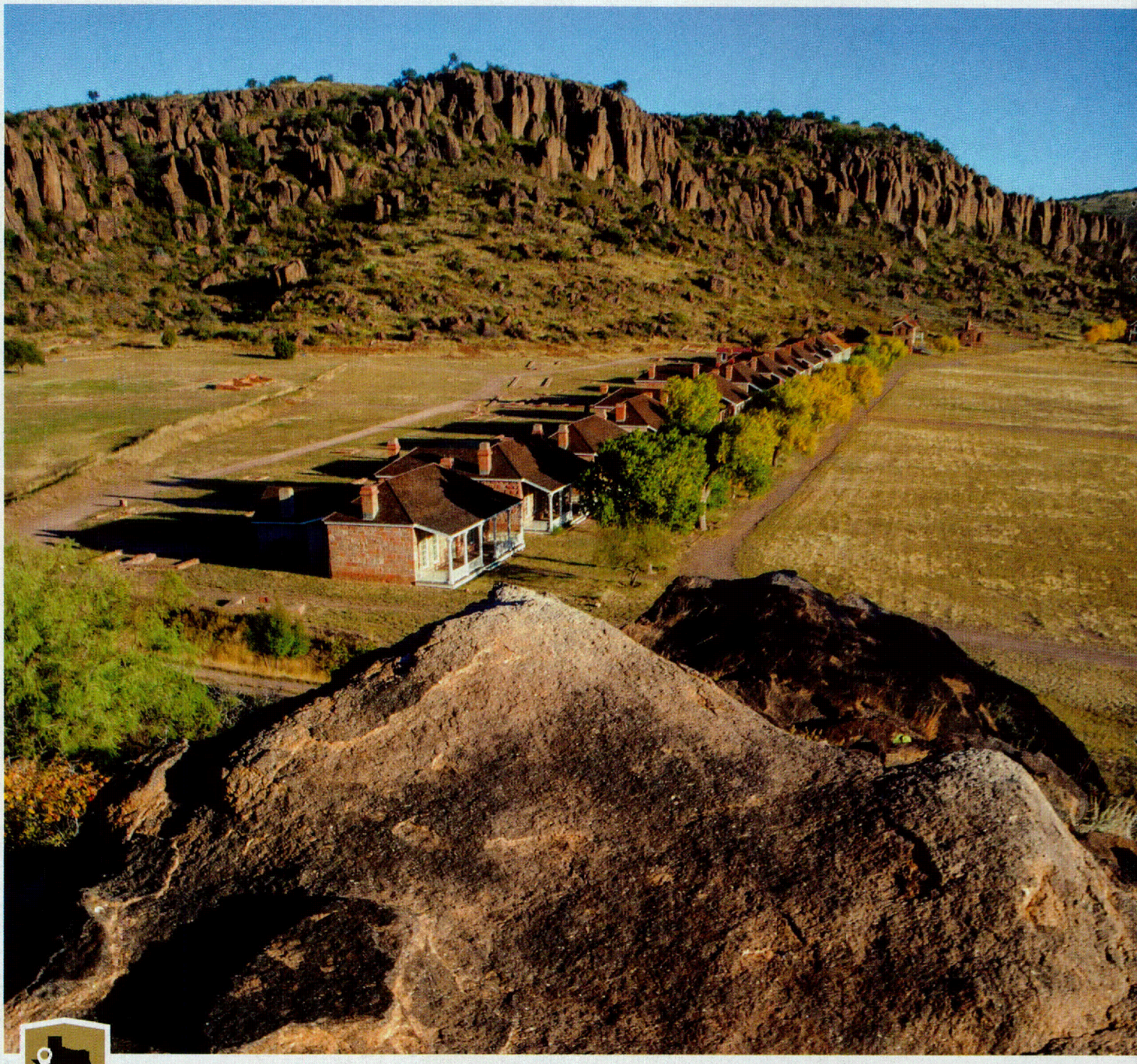
This park's landscape ranges from high mountains to rugged desert and 118 miles of riverfront along the Rio Grande—800,000 acres in all. Many visitors come for the 200 miles of designated trails, dramatic scenery, hot springs, and world-class geology. Thanks to this park's location in a remote corner of Texas, though, you'll also find some of the darkest skies in the country here. Many Texans see the Milky Way here for the very first time, and you can spot some 2,000 stars on a clear Big Bend night—compared to a few hundred in a medium-sized city and a mere handful in a metropolis like Houston.

Rangers and volunteer astronomers present periodic viewings of constellations, nebula, star clusters, and other celestial bodies visible to the naked eye. But there's no need to wait; simply look up and take in the night sky almost anywhere in the park. If you want to scan the entire horizon without mountains in the way, though, stargaze from a riverside campground, Sotol Vista, or one of the road pull-outs in the low country. Chief interpreter David Elkowitz recommends the pullout near Mile 15.3 on the road to Rio Grande Village. You can see plenty with the unaided eye, but binoculars make stars really pop.

Throughout human history, our ancestors experienced night skies sparkling with stars, inspiring science, religion, philosophy, art, music, and literature. Under Big Bend's skies, we can reconnect to our place in the universe.

PHOTO: © Laurence Parent

To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit www.texashighwaysprints.com.



PARK-TO-PARK HIKE

Fort Davis National Historic Site

From 1854 until 1891, troops at Fort Davis, named for U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, protected travelers and goods on the road west from San Antonio to El Paso and the gold fields of California. In 1961, it became a national historic site. Today, it represents one of the best remaining examples of a frontier military post in the American Southwest, featuring six buildings restored to their 1880s appearance, along with 100 ruins.

One of the finest hikes in the state goes from the historic site, nestled in a box canyon near Limpia Creek, to adjacent Davis Mountains State Park. Start from the fort at the end of Officer's Row, ascend the 300-foot cliff on switchbacks, and walk to the overlook for a panoramic view of the sprawling fort. From here, you can complete the Tall Grass Loop (8/10 mile) before taking the North Ridge Trail a little more than a half-mile to the state park boundary. In the state park, hike about two miles on the Old CCC Trail or roughly three on Skyline Drive Trail to the interpretive center. Both routes offer incredible views of the surrounding countryside; Skyline Drive Trail passes an old lava flow and buildings constructed in the 1930s by Civilian Conservation Corps workers.

PHOTO: © Larry Ditto

RANCH TOUR

LBJ National Historical Park

The 36th President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, spent much of his life on this ranch outside of Johnson City. The Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park includes the LBJ Ranch, Johnson's boyhood home, and a visitor's center in Johnson City, which has exhibits about the life of the President and First Lady.

Some 14 miles west of town at the LBJ State Park and Historic Site's Visitor Center, you can pick up a free driving permit and a map for self-guided driving tours of the ranch. Stops along the tour include the Johnson family cemetery and the ranch house, known as the Texas White House.

Two stops you won't want to miss: Johnson's private plane, dubbed Air Force One-Half, and the ranch show barn. The former resides at the Airplane Hangar, which serves as the visitor center on the ranch property. You can step inside the cabin of this restored Lockheed JetStar aircraft and peer into the cockpit and cabin.

The LBJ Ranch still operates as a working cattle ranch, one of only two in the national park system, managing 125 head of Hereford cattle descended from Johnson's original herd. You'll see them grazing in pastures on the driving tour, and ranch wranglers bring a calf and a bull to the show barn every day to demonstrate roping and other typical ranch activities.

Austin-based writer Melissa Gaskill escapes to the state's parks whenever she has an opportunity.

MORE ONLINE

Discover more national park hidden gems at texashighways.com/webextra.

PHOTO: Will van Overbeek

ESSENTIALS

NATIONAL PARKS PRIMER

ALIBATES FLINT QUARRIES NATIONAL MONUMENT,
call 806/857-6680;
www.nps.gov/alfl.

AMISTAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA,
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Galveston was once known as the Wall Street of the South and served as the second busiest U.S. immigration station behind Ellis Island. You can learn about Galveston's history at its many museums, such as the new Bryan Museum, Texas Seaport Museum and 1877 Tall Ship ELISSA, Lone Star Flight Museum and Galveston Railroad Museum. The island is also home to one of the largest collections of well-preserved Victorian architecture in the country. Stunning examples like the 1892 Bishop's Palace and 1895 Moody Mansion are open for tours daily.

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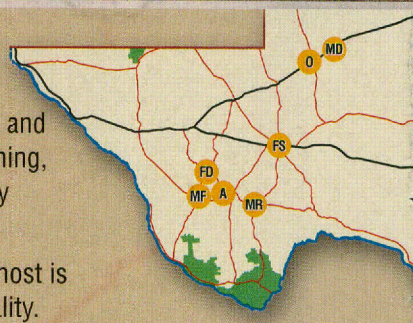

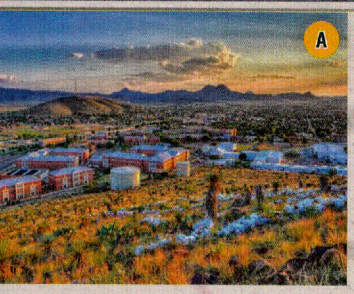

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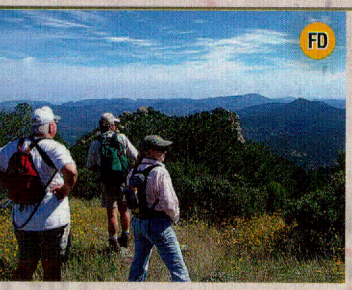

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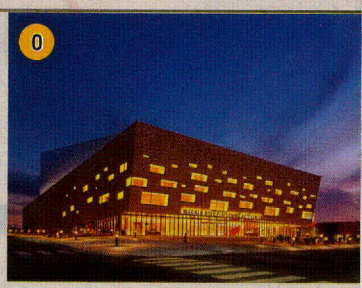

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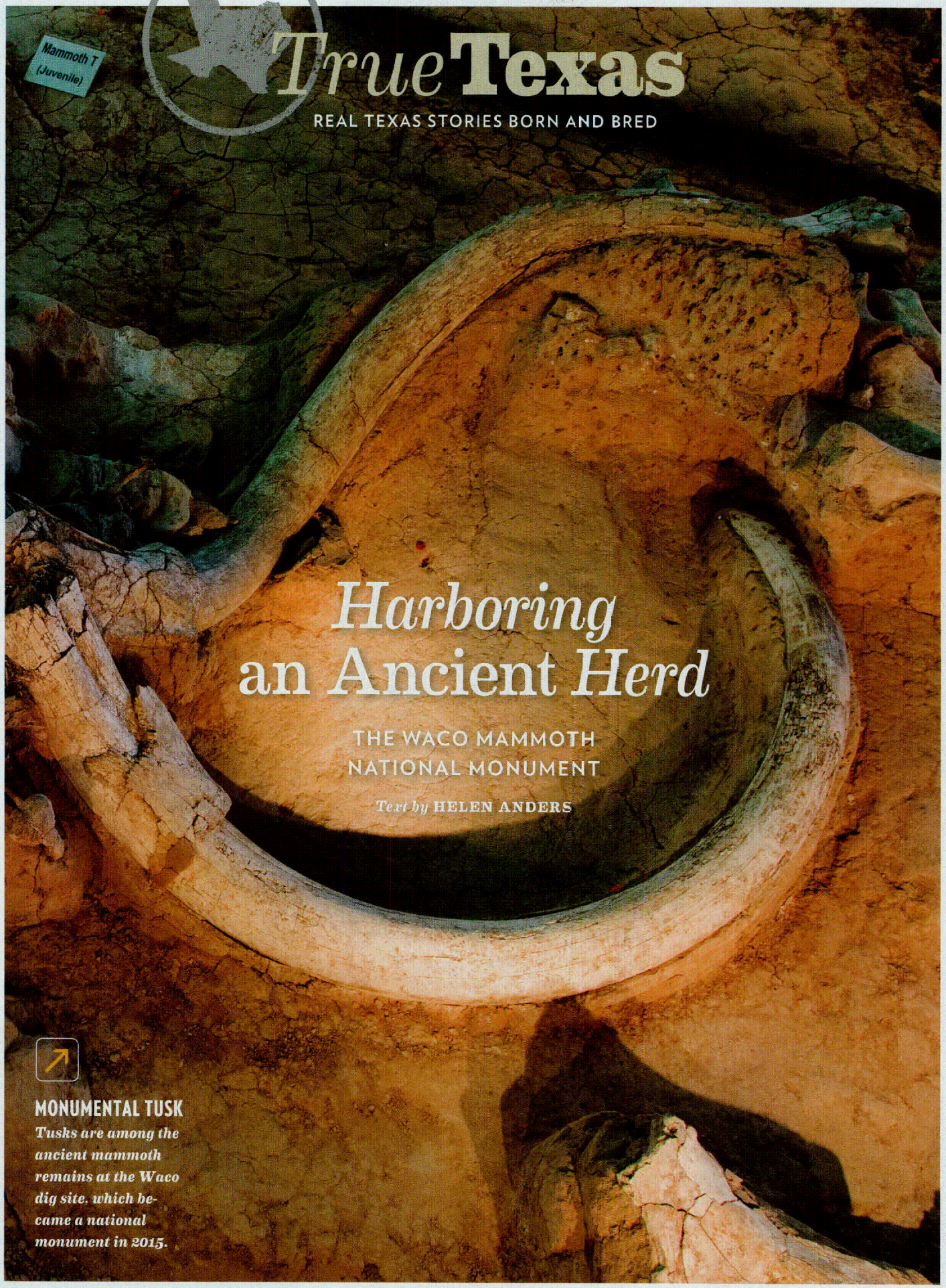

Harboring an Ancient Herd

THE WACO MAMMOTH NATIONAL MONUMENT

Text by **HELEN ANDERS**

MONUMENTAL TUSK
Tusks are among the ancient mammoth remains at the Waco dig site, which became a national monument in 2015.

PHOTO: Will van Overbeek

NURSERY HERD
The initial excavation at the Waco site focused on a herd of mother Columbian mammoths and their young.

SOME 65,000 YEARS AGO, A SMALL HERD of female Columbian mammoths and their babies wandered through a grassland in what is now north Waco during an intense rainstorm. The sweeping fields of tall grass, located between the Brazos and Bosque rivers about a mile from where the two rivers converge, weren't covered in a heavy shroud of live oaks, mesquites, and juniper trees as they are today. Instead, the area resembled the African savanna, populated not only by the hulking mammoths but also by saber-toothed cats, giant sloths, and even camels.

On that rainy day, paleontologists envision, torrents engorged one or both of the nearby rivers, causing tremendous floods and mudslides that swept the mammoths away and buried them in a morass of the region's white clay. This summer, nearly 40 years after two teenagers discovered one of the mammoth's bones, President Barack Obama proclaimed the excavation site a national monument, culminating local efforts to preserve the site for public education and future scientific study.

Paleontologists have found bones from 24 mammoths and a few other ancient animals here.

A visit to what the National Park Service calls "the nation's first and only recorded discovery of a nursery herd of Pleistocene mammoths" offers a look at the bones and an examination of the lives of these creatures that lived many millions of years after dinosaurs became extinct. Paleontologists have found fossils from 24 mammoths and a few other ancient animals here. As a national monument, the site is adding four park rangers to work with city staff to run the facility and offer guided tours, which are the only way for the public to see the excavation site.

Tours begin outside on a bridge overlooking the ravine where Paul Barron and Eddie Bufkin in 1978 stumbled across a bone that was clearly too big to have been from a cow. They took it to Baylor University, where scientists identified it as part of a femur from a Columbian mammoth. Excited, the scientists gathered volunteers, armed them with bamboo scrapers and brushes, and began the tedious search for mammoths. Patiently they worked, eight to 10 feet down in a pit, often under a blazing Texas sun, for a dozen years.

"It was hard work, but when you keep finding more and more, it keeps your motivation going," says Raegan King, the site manager.

By 1990, they had discovered 16

PHOTOS: Will van Overbeek

mammoths—all from the buried herd of females and juveniles. A herd's females raised the babies, King explains, and they traveled together as a nursery herd. Around puberty, young males went off to journey separately.

These mammoths walked the earth about 150,000 to 10,000 years ago, King says. (By contrast, dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago.) Unlike the better-known, shorter woolly mammoths, which lived in the northern regions of the continent, Columbian mammoths might not have been as woolly. There was probably no need for a heavy coat in the warmer environments of southern North America and Central America.

Standing as tall as 14 feet and weighing about 10 tons, about twice the size of a modern-day elephant, Columbian mammoths grazed about 20 hours a day, consuming many hundreds of pounds of grass. They had five-toed feet and walked on their tippy-toes, supported by a pad at the base of their digits. The Columbian mammoth became extinct about 10,000 years ago, and although scientists aren't sure why, they think a combination of climate change, hunting by humans, and food-source depletion whittled their numbers.

The excavation team unearthed the 16 nursery herd mammoths between 1978 and 1990, encasing the fossils in plaster and archiving them out of

public view at Baylor's Mayborn Museum Complex. The team continued working and found more bones—seven more mammoths, some probably from the same herd found earlier, along with three that paleontologists believe died about 14,000 years later. They also found the bones of a camel, some ribs from an unidentified animal, and a canine from a saber-toothed cat. Scientists think floods were responsible for burying these animals in mud, too.

For years, Baylor and Waco kept the bones secret to keep them from being disturbed, but in 1996, the owners donated the private property containing the dig site to the city. Waco and Baylor then incorporated the Waco Mammoth Foundation to raise money for a structure to be built around the site of discovery so that the public could see the bones exactly where they were found. The site opened to visitors in 2009, surrounded by a five-acre city park and another 102 acres of undeveloped land.

For a tour of the site, I join a class of fourth graders from Lorena and a senior citizens group from Fort Worth. We walk into the air-conditioned structure, and King points out a mural depicting what the Columbian mammoth might have looked like—might, because nobody knows for sure. Scientists know what woolly mammoths' bodies looked like, because they were preserved in ice. But Texas didn't ice over during the Pleistocene ice age, and all that remain from these Columbian mammoths are bones.

What's known about these mammoths is what their skeletons reveal. As we gaze down from a catwalk at the bones lying in the pit of clay, it's easy to discern a mammoth head, huge tusks, and ribs of a bull. As the group gathers around, oohing and snapping photos, King points out that one of the ribs has a bulge that indicates it had been broken, probably in a fight with another bull.

"This is the best part of paleontology," King says. "You learn not just how the animals died, but how they lived."

As we examine the bones of several mammoths, she points out the flat, ridged, worn teeth. They look something like the bottom of a tennis shoe. They're flat, because mammoths were vegetarians and didn't need sharp teeth to tear meat. Whereas we humans get two sets of teeth, mammoths got six. Once the last set of teeth was ground down—thought to be about 75 years after birth—the animal was no longer able to eat and died.

Near the bull mammoth, King points out the remains of a camel. Texas camels probably didn't have humps; they may not have evolved the need for moisture-storing fat deposits. She also shows us a replica of a saber-cat's tooth (because the original is in storage) and a couple of rib bones from an as-yet-unidentified animal. King says she's sure it will be identified if digging resumes and the rest of its bones turn up.

And they are almost sure to turn up. King says that as dirt collapsed while the site structure was being built, another mammoth—the 24th to be found—was revealed. Excavators carefully tucked it back in the earth to be examined later. At the time, Baylor was out of room to store more mammoth bones at the Mayborn. But King says that the presidential proclamation that the dig site is now Waco Mammoth National Monument will likely change that by bringing more tourists, more scientific attention, and more digging.

"We have a 107-acre park," she says, "and we have a lot more work to do. A lot more mammoths to find."

THE WACO MAMMOTH NATIONAL MONUMENT,

at 6220 Steinbeck Bend Dr. in Waco, opens Tue-Fri 11-5 and Sat 9-5. Access to the dig site is available only by guided tours, which take place every 30 minutes and last 45 minutes. Tour tickets cost $5 for adults, $4 for seniors, military, and students; and $3 for kids ages four through sixth grade. Call **254/750-7946**; **www.nps.gov/waco**.

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February's travel spotlights:

BIG BEND COUNTRY > *Lajitas*

Desert Biking

With February highs in the mid-60s, lows in the mid-30s, and a good chance of sunshine, Big Bend offers a perfect winter climate for mountain biking the region's scenic terrain. February 11-13, the annual Chihuahuan Desert Bike Fest makes the most of the season—and draws several hundred riders—with organized rides at Big Bend Ranch State Park, Big Bend National Park, and Lajitas Resort. The outings range in difficulty and length from kids' rides to a 54-mile venture into the state park. Nightly dinners and socials round out the weekend. www.desertsportstx.com.

HILL COUNTRY > *Austin*

Ameripolitan Music

Veteran Austin honky-tonker Dale Watson (at right) grew so disgusted with the direction of mainstream country music that he set out to define a new genre of roots music with the term "Ameripolitan." February 16 at Austin's Paramount Theatre, the third annual Ameripolitan Music Awards celebrates the sounds of honky-tonk, Western swing, rockabilly, and outlaw with awards and performances, including by Charley Pride and Red Simpson (2016 Master Award winners), James Hand, Kim Lenz, and Wayne Hancock. February 12-15, the event will showcase Ameripolitan bands at clubs around Austin, as well as performances at the State Theater of *The Doyle and Debbie Show*. www.ameripolitan.com.

PRAIRIES AND LAKES > *Dallas*

Year of the Monkey

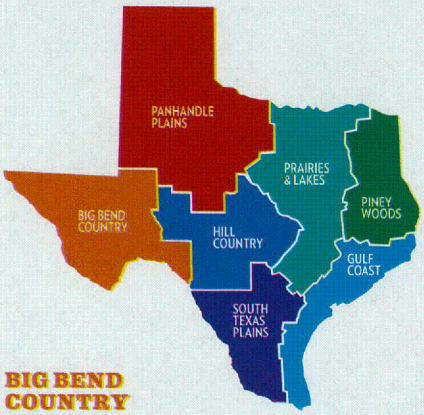
February 13, the Crow Collection of Asian Art will honor the Chinese zodiac's Year of the Monkey with its annual Chinese New Year Festival. Located in the Dallas Arts District, the event features traditional Chinese cultural activities such as fortune telling, calligraphy demos, and arts-and-crafts for kids. There will also be food trucks and an outdoor stage with performances including Asian music and dance groups, as well as traditional lion dances—harbingers of good luck for the new year. The festival closes with a 7:30 p.m. fireworks show. www.crowcollection.org.

SOUTH TEXAS PLAINS > *San Antonio*

Let's Rodeo!

It's time for the San Antonio Spurs to make way for cowboys, bulls, and bands as the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo takes over the AT&T Center and its surrounding complex of expo halls, livestock barns, and carnival and fair grounds. Taking place February 11-28, the event features 20 PRCA rodeos, a petting zoo, horse shows, all manner of livestock exhibitions, and live music ranging from Pitbull to Brad Paisley and La Maquinaria Norteña. Last year, 1.7 million turned out for the spectacle. www.sarodeo.com.

PHOTOS: *(from top)* Chase Fountain/TPWD; Sandra Dahdah/courtesy Ameripolitan Music Awards; courtesy Crow Collection; courtesy San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo.



BIG BEND COUNTRY

ALPINE: *Tom Lea Retrospective* Through March 20. Museum of the Big Bend. 432/837-8145

ALPINE: Texas Cowboy Poetry Gathering February 26-27. www.texascowboypoetry.com 800/561-3712

EL PASO: El Paso Marathon February 21. www.elpasomarathon.org

ODESSA: Midessa Boat, RV, Sport, and Gun Show February 12-14. www.midessaboatshow.net 432/381-3324

GULF COAST

ARANSAS PASS: Texas Winter Market II February 13-14. www.texasmarketguide.com 888/225-3427

BEAUMONT: Symphony of Southeast Texas Concert February 20. www.sost.org 409/892-2257

BROWNSVILLE: Ranger Walks at Fort Brown Through March 29. www.nps.gov/paal 956/541-2785 ext. 333

BROWNSVILLE: Ranger Walks at Palo Alto Battlefield Through March 30. www.nps.gov/paal 956/541-2785 ext. 333

BROWNSVILLE: Ranger Walks at Resaca de la Palma Battlefield Through March 31. www.nps.gov/paal 956/541-2785 ext. 333

CORPUS CHRISTI: *A Little Bit Wicked* February 20. Texas A&M-Corpus Christi Performing Arts Center. 361/883-6683

CORPUS CHRISTI: Polka Fest February 27. Sokol Hall. www.chssouthtexas.org 361/877-9932

CORPUS CHRISTI: Shanghai Quartet and Wu Man February 27. www.corpuschristichambermusic.org 361/888-7785

GALVESTON: Mardi Gras Galveston January 29-February 9. www.mardigrasgalveston.com 409/770-0999

GALVESTON: *The Lightning Thief* February 10. www.thegrand.com 800/821-1894

GALVESTON: Wellington International Ukulele Orchestra of New Zealand February 13. www.thegrand.com 409/765-1894

GALVESTON: Galveston Symphony Orchestra Concert February 14. www.thegrand.com 800/821-1894

GALVESTON: TAO presents *Seventeen Samurai* February 26. www.thegrand.com 409/765-1894

GALVESTON: Itzhak Perlman in Concert February 27. www.thegrand.com 409/765-1894

HOUSTON: 2016 International Watercolor Exhibition and Workshop Through March 31.

www.watercolorhouston.org 713/942-9966

HOUSTON: *Contingent Beauty: Contemporary Art from Latin America* Through February 28. www.mfah.org

HOUSTON: *Jennie C. Jones: Compilation* Through March 27. www.camh.org

HOUSTON: *The Book of Maggie* January 20-February 14. www.stagestheatre.com 713/527-0123

HOUSTON: Box 13 ArtSpace Exhibits January 30-March 12. www.box13artspace.com

HOUSTON: *Straight White Men* February 10-March 6. www.stagestheatre.com 713/527-0123

HOUSTON: CONCACAF Women's Olympic Qualifying Championship February 11, 14, 16, 19, 21. www.bbvacompass stadium.com

HOUSTON: ROCO In Concert: *Matchmaking* February 13. The Church of St. John the Divine. www.rocohouston.org 713/665-2700

HOUSTON: *Lucidarium: Love Letters from the Italian Renaissance* February 14. www.houstonearlymusic.org 281/846-4222.

HOUSTON: *The Sound of Music* February 16-21. www.broadwayatthehobby center.com 713/622-7469

HOUSTON: *William N. Copley Retrospective* February 19-July 24. www.menil.org

HOUSTON: Greater Houston Train Show February 20. www.sanjacmodeltrains.org 713/376-0684

HOUSTON: *Sculpted in Steel: Art Deco Automobiles and Motorcycles, 1929–1940* February 21-May 30. www.mfah.org

HOUSTON: *The Sleeping Beauty* February 25-March 6. www.houstonballet.org

HOUSTON: World's Championship Barbecue Contest February 25-27. www.rodeohouston.com 832/667-1000

HOUSTON: ROCO Unchambered: Piano vs. Piano February 28. www.rocohouston.org 713/665-2700

LA PORTE: Mardi Gras On Main February 20. www.visitlaportetx.com/mardigras 281/470-5017

LAKE JACKSON: Branford Marsalis Quartet in Concert February 5. www.clarion.brazosport.edu 979/230-3156

LAMAR: LaMardi Gras February 12-13. www.lamardigras.com

ORANGE: *Tommy: A Bluegrass Opry* February 2. www.lutcher.org 409/886-5535

ORANGE: *Elephant and Piggie's 'We Are In a Play!'* February 5. www.lutcher.org 409/886-5535

ORANGE: The Band of the Royal Marines in Concert February 16. www.lutcher.org 409/886-5535

ORANGE: Riverdance 20th Anniversary World Tour February 24-25. www.lutcher.org 409/886-5535

PORT ARANSAS: Whooping Crane Festival February 25-28. www.whoopingcranefestival.org 361/749-5919

ROCKPORT: Bountiful Bowl February 6. Rockport-Fulton High School. 361/729-5352.

ROCKPORT: Clay Expo February 6-7. Rockport Center for the Arts. www.rockportartcenter.com

SUGAR LAND: *Biodiversity in the Art of Carel Pieter Brest van Kempen* Through February 14. The Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land. www.hmns.org 281/313-2277

SUGAR LAND: Valentine's Event and Lecture February 14. The Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land. www.hmns.org 281/313-2277

SUGAR LAND: *Amazing Butterflies* February 20-May 15. The Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land. www.hmns.org 281/313-2277

VICTORIA: *Songs for a New World* February 12-14, 18-20. www.theatrevictoria.org 361/570-8587

VICTORIA: Dark Circles Contemporary Dance Company February 22. www.victoriaballet.org 361/575-2313

VICTORIA: Victoria Livestock Show February 22-29. www.victorialivestockshow.com 361/576-4300

VICTORIA: Victoria Symphony Master Series Concert February 27. www.victoriasymphony.com 361/576-4500

HILL COUNTRY

AUSTIN: *Donald Moffett* Through February 28. www.blantonmuseum.org

AUSTIN: *Shakespeare in Print and Performance* Through May 29. www.hrc.utexas.edu 512/471-8949

AUSTIN: *Texas Czechs: Rooted in Tradition* January 17-June 9. www.polkaworks.org 512/799-6842

AUSTIN: Girlstart Weather Fest February 7. The Bullock Museum. www.girlstart.org 512/916-4775

AUSTIN: *Look Inside: New Photography Acquisitions* February 9-May 29. www.hrc.utexas.edu

AUSTIN: Ballet Austin Performance: Director's Choice February 12-14. www.balletaustin.org 512/476-2163

AUSTIN: Guitars Under the Stars with Ana Vidovic February 13. www.austinclassicalguitar.org 512/300-2247

AUSTIN: Art on the Edge February 20. Blanton Museum of Art. 512/475-6013

AUSTIN: *Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s* February 21-May 15. www.blantonmuseum.org

AUSTIN: *The Sound of Music* February 23-28. www.BroadwayInAustin.com 800/731-7469

AUSTIN: Carnaval Brasileiro February 27. www.sambaparty.com

AUSTIN: David Russell in Concert February 27. www.austinclassicalguitar.org 512/300-2247

AUSTIN: *Life and Death on the Border 1910-1920* January 23-April 3. www.thestoryoftexas.com 512/936-8746

BANDERA: Cowboy Capital Opry February 2. www.silversagecorral.org 830/796-4969

BANDERA: Frontier Times Museum Cowboy Camp February 7. www.frontiertimesmuseum.org 830/796-3864

BOERNE: *A Night at the Oscars* February 6. www.visitboerne.org 830/331-9079

BOERNE: Boerne Chocolate Walk February 13. www.visitboerne.org 830/249-9511 opt. 5

BOERNE: *TAO: Seventeen Samurai* February 25. www.visitboerne.org 830/331-9079

BOERNE: Boerne Antiques Show February 27-28. www.texasantiqueshows.com 830/329-2870

CANYON LAKE: Winter Texan Reception February 9. www.canyonlakechamber.com 830/964-2223

FREDERICKSBURG: First Friday Art Walk February 5. www.ffawf.com 830/997-6523

FREDERICKSBURG: *Into the Woods* February 19-March 6. www.fredericksburgtheater.org 830/997-3588

FREDERICKSBURG: Fredericksburg Trade Days February 19-21. www.fbgtradedays.com 210/846-4094

FREDERICKSBURG: The Four Proches February 21. www.fredericksburgmusicclub.com 830/990-2886

GRUENE: Gospel Brunch with a Texas Twist February 14. www.gruenehall.com 830/629-5077

GRUENE: Come and Taste It February 18. www.grapevineingruene.com 830/606-0093

GRUENE: Old Gruene Market Days February 20-21. www.gruenemarketdays.com 830/832-1721

JUNCTION: Disc Golf PDGA Tournament February 19-21. www.junctiontexas.com 325/446-5356

KERRVILLE: First Friday Wine Share February 5. www.storkcountry.com 830/200-1483

KERRVILLE: Mardi Gras on Main February 9. www.mainstreetkerrville.com

KERRVILLE: Daddy Daughter Sweetheart Dance February 13. www.kerrvilletx.gov 830/257-7300

KERRVILLE: Nelson Illusions February 13. www.caillouxtheater.com 830/896-9393

KERRVILLE: Chocolate Fantasy February 14. www.kacckerrville.com 830/895-2911

KERRVILLE: Symphony of the Hills Concert February 25. www.symphonyofthehills.org 830/792-7469

LUCKENBACH: Luckenbach Hug-In and Valentine Ball February 12-13. www.luckenbachtexas.com 830/997-3224

MARBLE FALLS: *Quilts: Made in America* February 12-13. www.marblefallsquiltclub.blogspot.com 830/598-7539

NEW BRAUNFELS: *Lindheimer's Texas* Through May 1. The Sophienburg Museum and Archives. 830/629-1572

NEW BRAUNFELS: Fat Tuesday with Alex Meixner February 9. www.brauntex.org 830/627-0808

NEW BRAUNFELS: Hill Country Doll Show and Sale February 13. www.innewbraunfels.com 830/606-5868

SAN MARCOS: *Animals Among Us: Photographs from the Permanent Collection* Through May 13. www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu 512/245-2907

SAN MARCOS: *Places in the Heart: Texas Cinescapes* Through July 3. www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu 512/245-2907

UVALDE: Four Square Friday February 12. www.visituvalde.com 830/278-4115

WIMBERLEY: *Narnia: The Musical* January 29-February 21. www.emilyann.org 512/847-6969

WIMBERLEY: Starlight Symphony Orchestra Concert February 21. www.starlightsymphony.org 512/847-2022

PANHANDLE PLAINS

ABILENE: Texas Farm-Ranch-Wildlife Expo February 23-24. www.abilenechamber.com 325/677-7241

ALBANY: *Texas Moderns: Bror Utter* Through February 7. www.theoldjailartcenter.org 325/762-2269

ALBANY: Cell Series: Linda Ridgway Through February 7. www.theoldjailartcenter.org 325/762-2269

ALBANY: *Robert Langham: Blackforest Bestiary Exhibition* February 27-May 14. www.theoldjailartcenter.org 325/762-2269

AMARILLO: *Brundibar* February 6. www.amarilloopera.org 806/372-7464

AMARILLO: Ink Life Tour Tattoo and Music Festival February 18-21. www.InkLifeTour.com 866/953-1822

CANYON: *Wildlife and Hunting Photographs from the Panhandle-Plains Region* Through February 6. www.panhandleplains.org

SAN ANGELO: San Angelo Stock Show and Rodeo February 3-21. www.visitsanangelo.org 325/655-4136

SAN ANGELO: Family Day: Lunar New Year February 13. www.samfa.org 325/653-3333

SAN ANGELO: Downtown Art Walk February 18. www.samfa.org 325/653-3333

SAN ANGELO: Cactus Market Days February 20. Cactus Hotel Parking Lot. 325/949-6200

SAN ANGELO: Buffalo Soldier Heritage Day February 28. www.fortconcho.com 325/481-2730

SAN ANGELO: Salmon Sculpture Competition Through August 7. www.samfa.org 325/653-3333

WICHITA FALLS: Arts Alive! Home and Garden Show February 27-28. www.wfmpec.com/events 940/767-2787

PINEY WOODS

CROCKETT: *Driving Miss Daisy* February 19. www.pwfaa.org 936/544-4276

GLADEWATER: Valentine Dinner and Dance February 11. www.gladewaterchamber.org 903/845-5501

HUNTSVILLE: Rocky Raccoon 100 Mile Run February 6. www.tejastrails.com

HUNTSVILLE: Rocky 50 Mile February 13. www.tejastrails.com 936/295-5644

JEFFERSON: Mardi Gras Upriver February 5-7. www.visitjeffersontexas.com 903/665-3733

LUFKIN: Corks and Forks February 6. www.visitlufkin.com 936/633-0359

LUFKIN: Sandi Patty, Forever Grateful: The Farewell Tour February 11. www.thepineslufkin.com 936/633-0359

MAGNOLIA: Mardi Gras on The Stroll February 13. www.cityofmagnolia.com 281/356-2266 ext. 3

TYLER: *Chihuly: Works from Texas Collections* February 7-May 15. www.tylermuseum.org 903/595-1001

TYLER: Lecture: George F. Will February 9. www.cowancenter.org 903/566-7424

TYLER: *Saturday Night Fever* February 26. www.cowancenter.org 903/566-7424

PRAIRIES AND LAKES

ARLINGTON: *Modern Masters: Warhol, Pollock, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, de Kooning, Motherwell* Through February 21. www.arlingtonmuseum.org

ARLINGTON: AMA Supercross Monster Energy February 20. www.amasupercross.com

ARLINGTON: PBR Iron Cowboy Major February 27. www.attstadium.com

ARLINGTON: RFD-TVs The American Rodeo February 28. www.attstadium.com

BASTROP: Citywide Garage Sale February 27-28. www.cwgs.com 512/441-2828

BELTON: *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race Traveling Exhibit* January 16-March 12. www.bellcountymuseum.org 254/933-5243

BRENHAM: Bi-annual Quilt Show February 5-6. www.visitbrenhamtexas.com 888/273-6426

CLARKSVILLE: Music and Art Expo by Red River Revue Center for the Arts February 13. www.redriverrevue.weebly.com 903/739-0659

CLEBURNE: *Beauty and the Beast* January 29-February 27. www.plaza-theatre.com 817/202-0600

CLIFTON: Quanah Parker Exhibit: *A Woman OF Two Worlds and a Man IN Two Worlds* January 11-March 4. www.bosquemuseum.org 254/675-3845

COLLEGE STATION: Brazos Valley Senior Games February 18-21. www.cstx.gov/seniors 979/764-3486

COLLEGE STATION: DJ Spooky February 18. www.academyarts.tamu.edu

DALLAS: *Alexander Gorlizki: Variable Dimensions* Through March 20. www.crowcollection.org 214/979-6430

DALLAS: *Spirit and Matter: Masterpieces from the Keir Collection of Islamic Art* Through July 31. www.DMA.org

DALLAS: *Piero Golia: Chalet Dallas* Through February 7. www.NasherSculptureCenter.org

DALLAS: *Creatures of Light: Nature's Bioluminescence* Through February 21. www.perotmuseum.org 214/428-5555

DALLAS: *Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots* Through March 20. www.dma.org

DALLAS: *A Year with Frog and Toad* January 29-February 28. www.dct.org 214/740-0051

DALLAS: DFW Winter Boat Expo January 29-February 6. www.dallasboatexpo.com 972/247-1369

DALLAS: Tour of Texas and Texas Fest Volleyball February 6-7. www.summitvolleyball.com

DALLAS: Faure Piano Quartet in Concert February 8. www.DallasChamberMusic.org 844/326-7844

DALLAS: 2016 Mardi Gras Parade and Festival February 9. Dallas City Hall. 972/679-2671

DALLAS: Soundings: New Music at the Nasher February 19. www.NasherSculptureCenter.org

DALLAS: Deep Ellum Outdoor Market February 20. www.deepellummarket.com

DALLAS: NCA and NDA All-Star Cheerleading National Championships February 20-21. www.nca.varsity.com

DALLAS: Drag Brunch February 28. www.dish-dallas.com 214/522-3474

DECATUR: Wise County Antique Auto Swap Meet February 25-28. www.wcaac.com 940/627-6555

DENTON: *Materials Hard and Soft* February 5-April 1. www.dentonarts.com 940/382-2787

DENTON: Thin Line Fest February 17-21. www.thinlinefest.com 888/893-4560

ELGIN: Flea Market Days February 4. 512/285-4025

ELGIN: Sip, Shop and Stroll February 11. www.elgintx.com 512/281-5724

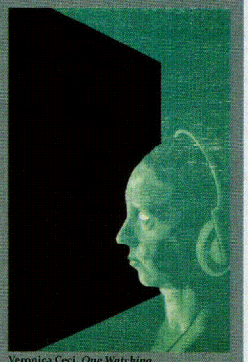
ENNIS: Ennis Czech Music Festival February 13. www.ennisczechmusicfestival.com 972/878-4748

FARMERSVILLE: Farmers and Fleas Market February 6. www.farmersvilletx.com 972/784-6846

ON VIEW
DECEMBER 12, 2015
THROUGH
FEBRUARY 28, 2016

ART MUSEUM OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS

HOT OFF THE PRESS: Recent Works from Flatbed



Veronica Cecil, *One Watching*

Linnis Blanton, *Dr. Seuss Letter Opener*

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FORT WORTH: *Pasture Cows Crossing Indian Creek* Through May 30. www.cartermuseum.org 817/738-1933

FORT WORTH: *That Day: Laura Wilson* Through February 14. www.cartermuseum.org 817/738-1933

FORT WORTH: *Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter's Eye* Through February 14. www.kimbellart.org 817/332-8451

FORT WORTH: *FOCUS: Glenn Kaino* January 30-April 17. www.themodern.org

FORT WORTH: *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood* February 6-May 1. www.cartermuseum.org

FORT WORTH: Fort Worth Symphony: *West Side Story* February 12-14. www.basshall.com 817/212-4280

FORT WORTH: Arlo Guthrie in Concert February 18. www.basshall.com 817/212-4280

FORT WORTH: Cowtown Marathon February 26-28. www.cowtownmarathon.org 817/207-0224

FORT WORTH: Texas Ballet Theater: *Classic Combination* February 26-28. www.texasballettheater.org 817/763-0207

GAINESVILLE: *Farce of Nature* February 19. www.butterfieldstage.org

GARLAND: Garland Symphony Orchestra Concert February 19. www.garlandsymphony.org 972/926-0611

GLEN ROSE: Sweetheart Safari Dinner and Tour February 13. www.fossilrim.org 254/897-2961

GRANBURY: First Saturday Bird Walk February 6. www.actonnaturecenter.org 817/326-6005

GRANBURY: Music, Massage and Merlot February 12, 26. www.dvinewineusa.com 817/573-7200

GRANBURY: Last Saturday Gallery Night on the Square February 27. www.facebook.com/galleriesofgranbury 817/579-7733

GRANBURY: Texas Independence Day Celebration February 27-28. www.march2texas.com 817/578-0234

HALLETTSVILLE: Market Days February 21. KC Hall. 361/772-0084

MCDADE: Sherwood Forest Faire February 13-April 3. www.sherwoodforestfaire.com 512/222-6680

MCKINNEY: *Dinosaurs Live! Life-Size Animatronic Dinosaurs* Through February 21. www.heardmuseum.org 972/562-5566

MCKINNEY: Second Saturday Bird Walk February 13. www.HeardMuseum.org 972/562-5566

MCKINNEY: Third Monday Trade Days February 12-15. www.tmtd.com 972/562-5466

MCKINNEY: Second Saturday on the Downtown Square February 13. www.downtownmckinney.com 972/547-2660

MESQUITE: Florence Ranch Homestead Tours February 13. www.historicmesquite.org 972/216-6468

MESQUITE: Mesquite Symphony Orchestra Concert February 20. www.mesquitesymphony.org 972/216-8127

MESQUITE: Opal Lawrence Historical Park Tours February 27. www.historicmesquite.org 972/216-6468

PLANO: *A Valentine Murder Mystery* February 13. www.roverdramawerks.com

PLANO: *Rocket Man* February 25-March 19. www.roverdramawerks.com

RICHARDSON: Sossy Mechanics' *Trick Boxing: Swingin' in the Ring* February 11-14. www.eisemanncenter.com 972/744-4650

RICHARDSON: Plano Symphony Orchestra Concert February 21. www.planosymphony.org 972/713-9920

RICHARDSON: Jeffret Siegel's Keyboard Conversations: *The Golden Age of the Piano* February 22. www.eisemanncenter.com 972/744-4650

RICHARDSON: Pilobolus Dance Theater February 27. www.eisemanncenter.com 972/744-4650

RICHARDSON: *Chicken Dance* February 28. www.eisemanncenter.com 972/744-4650

ROUND TOP: Valentine's Concert with Dick Smith and Friends February 6. www.festivalhill.org 979/249-3129

ROUND TOP: Annual Quilt Exhibit February 15-27. Winedale Historical Complex. www.winedale.org

TEMPLE: Beautiful Berbers Watercolors Exhibit January 15-March 18. www.cacARTS.org 254/773-9926

TEMPLE: Ailey II February 25. www.cacARTS.org 254/773-9926

THE COLONY: Daddy and Daughter Dance February 20. www.visitthecolonytx.com 972/625-1106

WACO: *Tinkertoy: Build Your Imagination* and *The Adventures of Mr. Potato Head* January 23-May 1. www.mayborn museum.com 254/710-1110

WASHINGTON: *Enduring Spirit: African Americans in 19th-Century Texas* Through February 15. www.starmuseum.org 936/878-2461

WAXAHACHIE: Gingerbread House Chili Cook-Off February 19-21. www.elliscountycac.org 972/937-1870

SOUTH TEXAS PLAINS

GOLIAD: The Green Flag of Gutierrez and Magee February 6. www.presidiolabahia.org 361/645-3752

LAREDO: Washington's Birthday Celebration January 21-February 22. www.wbcalaredo.org 956/722-0589

LAREDO: Laredo Birding Festival February 3-6. www.laredobirdingfestival.com 956/718-1063

LAREDO: Laredo Northside Market February 6. 956/763-0138

PHARR: Get Up And Train Half Marathon February 14. www.mvevents.com 956/292-4500

SAN ANTONIO: *Spurs for Texas: Selections from the Leo Quintanilla Collection* Through April 3. www.WitteMuseum.org

SAN ANTONIO: *The Wests of Texas: Cattle Ranching Entrepreneurs* Through April 3. www.WitteMuseum.org

SAN ANTONIO: *Collecting in Context* December 16-April 17. www.mcnayart.org 210/824-5368

SAN ANTONIO: Yamato Drummers: *Bakuon* February 9. www.artssa.org 210/226-2891

SAN ANTONIO: Fiesta Mexico Americana! Los Lobos and Ballet Folklorico February 12. www.artssa.org 210/226-2891

SAN ANTONIO: Band of the Royal Marines and Highland Pipes and Dancers February 17. www.artssa.org 210/226-2891

SAN ANTONIO: Pops Concert: *Bravo Broadway!* February 26-27. www.sasymphony.org 210/554-1010

WESLACO: Alfresco Weslaco Music and Art on the Street February 18. www.facebook.com/AlfrescoWeslaco 956/969-0838

WANT MORE?

GO TO THE EVENTS CALENDAR AT **www.texashighways.com.**

FOR A FREE PRINTED COPY of an even more detailed, quarterly schedule of events, write to *Texas Highways Events Calendar* subscriptions, Box 149249, Austin 78714-9249. Or, call 800/452-9292 from anywhere in the U.S. or Canada, between 8-6 Central.

FOR TEXAS TRAVEL QUESTIONS, call 800/452-9292 to reach a TxDOT Travel Information Center, where a professional travel counselor will provide routing assistance, advise you of road conditions, and send brochures (including the official *Texas State Travel Guide*, Texas Official Travel Map, and quarterly *Texas Highways Events Calendar*).

TO SUBMIT EVENT INFORMATION: www.texashighways.com and go to Events, Event Submission form; email: texasevents@txdot.gov; or mail: *Texas Highways Events Calendar*, Box 141009, Austin 78714-1009. Listing deadlines: Spring (Mar., Apr., May) Dec. 1; Summer (Jun., Jul., Aug.) Mar. 1; Fall (Sep., Oct., Nov.) Jun. 1; Winter (Dec., Jan., Feb.) Sep. 1.

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Paint the Town in Schulenburg

In the 1800s, European settlers flocked to Texas, with many Germans and Czechs putting down roots in the vast expanse between Houston and San Antonio. They brought their families, their traditions, and their food, setting modern trippers up for a Texas-size European vacation.

7:30 A.M. I started my day by indulging in the Czech breakfast of champions: kolaches. While Texans ascribe the name to both the fruit and meat variety of this bready pastry, I'm drawn to the buttery goodness of traditional fruit kolaches, which I found at the **Original Kountry Bakery**. The first two melted in my mouth so quickly that I had to grab a few more to go.

8:30 A.M. As I cruised the countryside, I followed the steeple on the horizon to **St. Mary Catholic Church** in High Hill, one of the area's famed "Painted Churches." While the brick facade may seem typical for a country church, inside lies a sanctuary full of ornate sculptures, stained glass, and paintings that rival those in the cathedrals of Europe. In total there are more than a half-dozen of these painted churches, including the two others I visited: **Sts. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church** in Dubina and **St. John the Baptist Catholic Church** in Ammannsville (pictured above), known as "The Pink One." It's not surprising that the Czechs and Germans brought their religious traditions to Texas, but it is surprising that they were able to construct such magnificent churches on the Texas frontier.

12:00 P.M. Ready for a tradition that feeds both the body and soul, I drove to **Sengelmann Hall**. Originally opened in 1894, the nostalgic spot features a big wooden bar and long family-style tables. Live music is a popular draw here, and the food is better than ever thanks to **Momma's at Sengelmann's**, which serves up homemade pizza, burgers, and a pork schnitzel that will make your eyes roll back in your head. I ordered mine with a big German beer and toasted "Prost" to lunch.

1:00 P.M. To put some oompah in my day, I walked to the **Texas Polka Music Museum**, which honors the many artists who have brought polka power to Texas. There were old records, instruments, and even some DJ equipment from a local all-polka radio station. I was so inspired that I bought a polka CD to enjoy some road-trip tunes on the way home.

2:30 P.M. Next stop: the **Stanzel Model Aircraft Museum**, dedicated to the local brothers who pioneered miniature aviation. Their most well-known plane, the "Tiger Shark," was the first control-line model kit in the world. The well-designed complex was packed with drawings, old machines, and the stories of how Victor and Joe Stanzel founded one of the most-loved model plane companies in America.

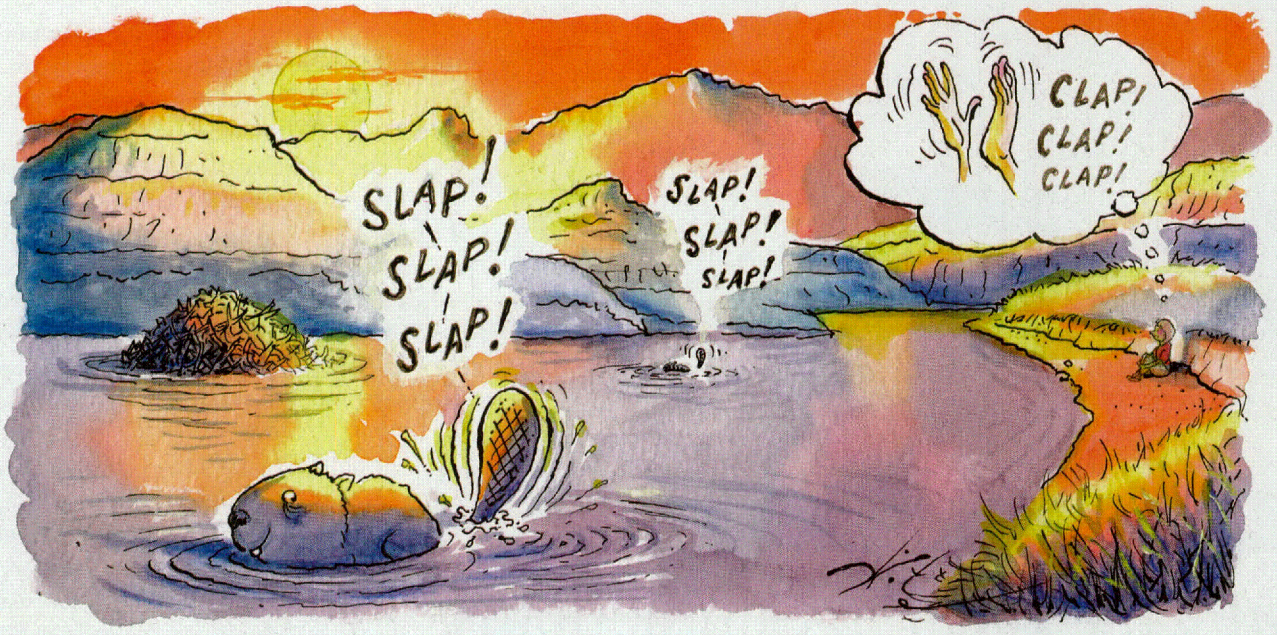
4:30 P.M. With a giant squirrel sign outside shouting "How 'Bout Them Nuts," I had no choice but to stop at the **Potter Country Store**, offering local pecans in every form and flavor, including raw, roasted, chocolate-covered, and stuffed in pies. They even had a warm cinnamon variety ready for "grab and go" consumption.

6:00 P.M. I saved just enough room for dinner at **The Garden Co. Marketplace and Cafe**. As the new restaurant in this old town, this spot squeezes a full-service nursery, a home and clothing shop, and a quaint cafe into one location. I wasn't sure whether to shop, eat, or re-landscape my flowerbeds. I decided on food first and devoured an entrée of seared duck topped with fruit chutney and served with vanilla-sage sweet potatoes—a delicious departure from standard country cooking.

In German, "Schulenburg" means "school town," and I certainly learned a lot about the German-Czech-Texan culture here. The town honors its history and transforms it into a brand new adventure. So whether you follow my footsteps or forge your own path, I hope to see you on the road. ★

For information on the town and tours of the Painted Churches (guided and self-guided), contact The Greater Schulenburg Chamber of Commerce, 979/743-4514; www.schulenburgchamber.org.

PHOTO: © Hogaboom Road, Inc.



Land *Down Under*

AN UPLIFTING DAY IN BIG BEND

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** *illustration by* **Michael Witte**

THAT GREAT BIG PARK DOWN IN THE yawning western expanse of our state is a gift for which every Texan should drop in to say thank you at least once in a lifetime. Always, a Big Bend road tour is best enjoyed by the patient, the subtle, the opportunistic. In the summer, to travel in the Texas outback is to test your mettle, but the rest of the year, when the rains come and the cacti bloom, the region can be surprisingly lush, even mellow.

Driving along the bone-jarring backroads of the national park, I feel as if I have earned the delights at trail's end. In a couple of hours you can drive to the mouth of Santa Elena Canyon and, at the end of a short climb, stand in a timeless gap between sheer cliffs that crimp the sky into a ribbon as narrow as the river lapping below you.

It would seem ridiculous to try to see Big Bend in a day. Yet, so irresistible are the park's sirens that heading west on to business in El Paso I have more than once found myself pulled from the interstate, powerless to resist them. If I only have a day, I may begin at the Visitors Center just to see what guided nature walks are on the schedule or investigate what birds I might expect to appear. But most of all I want to make my way quickly over to Santa Elena.

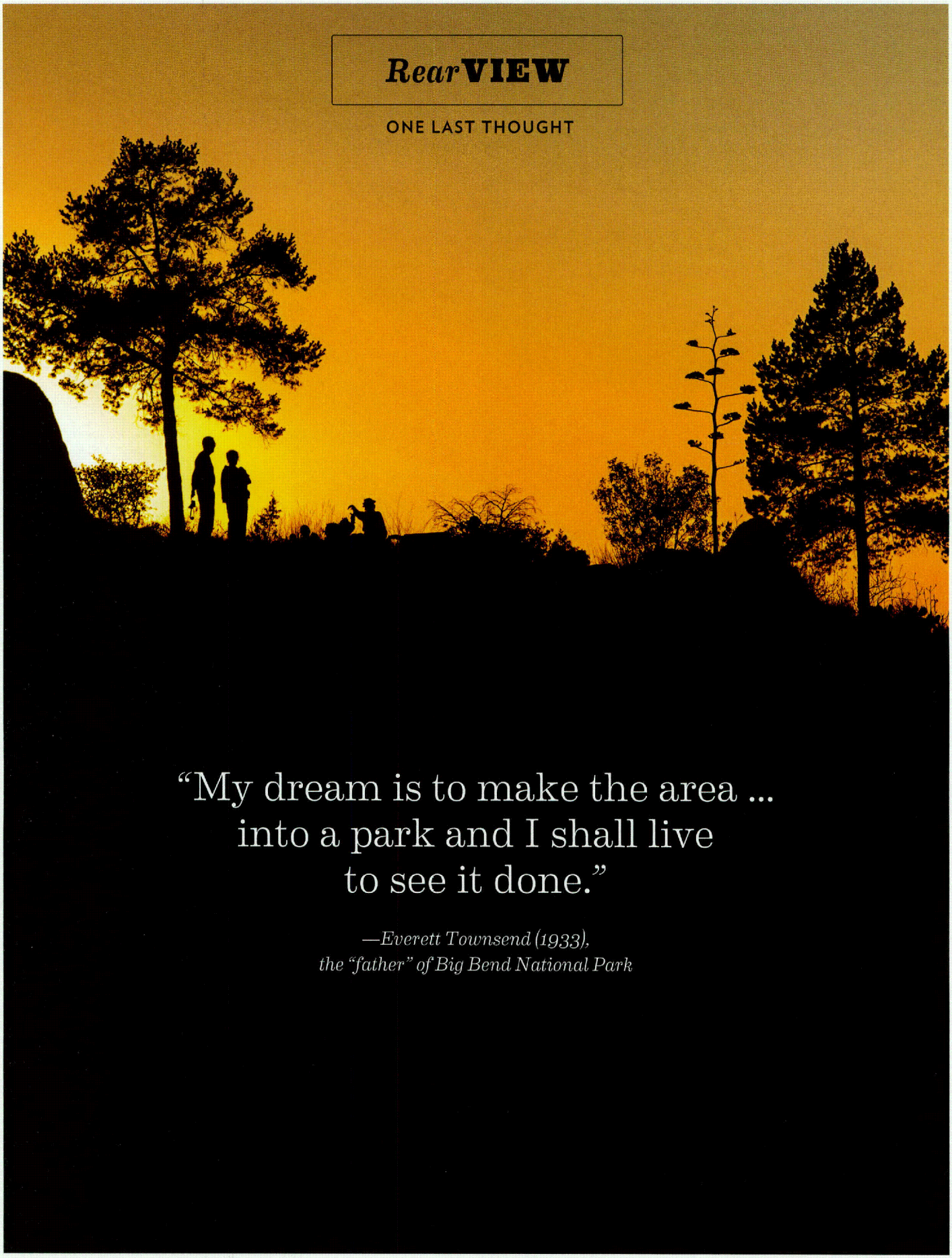
Toward the end of the day I will drive to Hot Springs, a one-time health resort partially swallowed by the river. On days when the Rio Grande is running low, you can soak in the 105-degree water as it bubbles into the ruins of a turn-of-the-century bathhouse.

Not to be missed is the sunset at Rio Grande Village, a campground oasis beneath the ruffled skirts of the Sierra del Carmen. As the sun dips, the Mexican mountains blush a vivid pink, bruise violet, and then glow a brassy gold. I like to watch the show from the banks of the mud-gargling river. Beavers float by silently, until—startled by some movement—they'll slap the water in a beaver-tail high five and disappear with the sun.

The park is a decompression chamber, the nearest interstate light-years away, the embrace of mountains somehow both familiar and strange creating a land free of cares. Always I know too soon I will have to make the climb up and out to I-10, a long drive illuminated by stars and headlights. But any time I can put real life on hold one more day, I do. ★

I like to watch the show from the banks of the mud-gargling river.

Find Babs Rodriguez's full adventure at texashighways.com/matters.



"My dream is to make the area ... into a park and I shall live to see it done."

—Everett Townsend (1933), the "father" of Big Bend National Park

SUNSET HIKERS *contemplate day's end from the Window View Trail at Big Bend National Park.*

PHOTO: © Larry Ditto

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