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TEXAS WILD

Of Feathers and Hope

THE GALVESTON ISLAND
FEATHERFEST AND
NATURE PHOTOFEST

text by GARY CLARK



ZOOM ZOOM

FeatherFest offers a wide range of birding and photography field trips, including outings to Bolivar Peninsula.



BIRD LAND
At left, Kevin Gaines of Sky Kings Falconry presents a laughing kookaburra, a type of kingfisher, at a FeatherFest photography workshop. Above, two birdwatchers board a field-trip bus at the Island Community Center.

“**H**OPE’ IS THE THING WITH feathers,” wrote 19th-Century American poet Emily Dickinson in the opening line of her poem of the same name.

This phrase came to mind as I boarded a tour bus before dawn last April during Galveston FeatherFest and Nature PhotoFest. With binoculars hanging from our necks and hats on our heads, my fellow birders and I were excited about the potential for great bird viewing, spectacular photo opportunities, and illuminating insights from expert guides. Despite a brisk southeast wind and cloudy skies threatening rain, we were hopeful.

And our hopes were not dashed. Measuring 27 miles long and three miles wide, Galveston Island is a birders’ paradise—especially during FeatherFest, which takes place April 14-17



GALVESTON FEATHERFEST AND NATURE PHOTOFEST is April 14-17. Online registration is open until April 10, or you can register during the festival at the Island Community Center, 4700 Broadway. Call 832/459-5533; www.galvestonfeatherfest.com.

this year. Billions of birds pass through the Upper Texas Coast in April after an arduous flight across the Gulf of Mexico from staging grounds on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. Untold numbers of those birds make their first landfall in the woodlots, marshes, and freshwater ponds of Galveston Island.

FeatherFest capitalizes on this phenomenon with four days of activities, including dozens of guided bus and boat field trips to various birding sites; photography and birding workshops; themed dinners; a market featuring photography equipment and arts and crafts; a Fledgling-Fest for children; and a raptor show.

Put on by the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council, FeatherFest is headquartered at the Island Community Center on Broadway, the location of most events and the meeting point for most tours.

Last year’s event drew about 650 birders and photographers, and participants recorded sightings of 222 bird species—everything from blue-winged teals to magnificent frigatebirds, red-shouldered hawks, purple gallinules, and buff-breasted sandpipers. The birding field trips scour the area, including the Anahuac and Brazos national wildlife refuges, the Beaumont area, Bolivar Peninsula, Brazos Bend

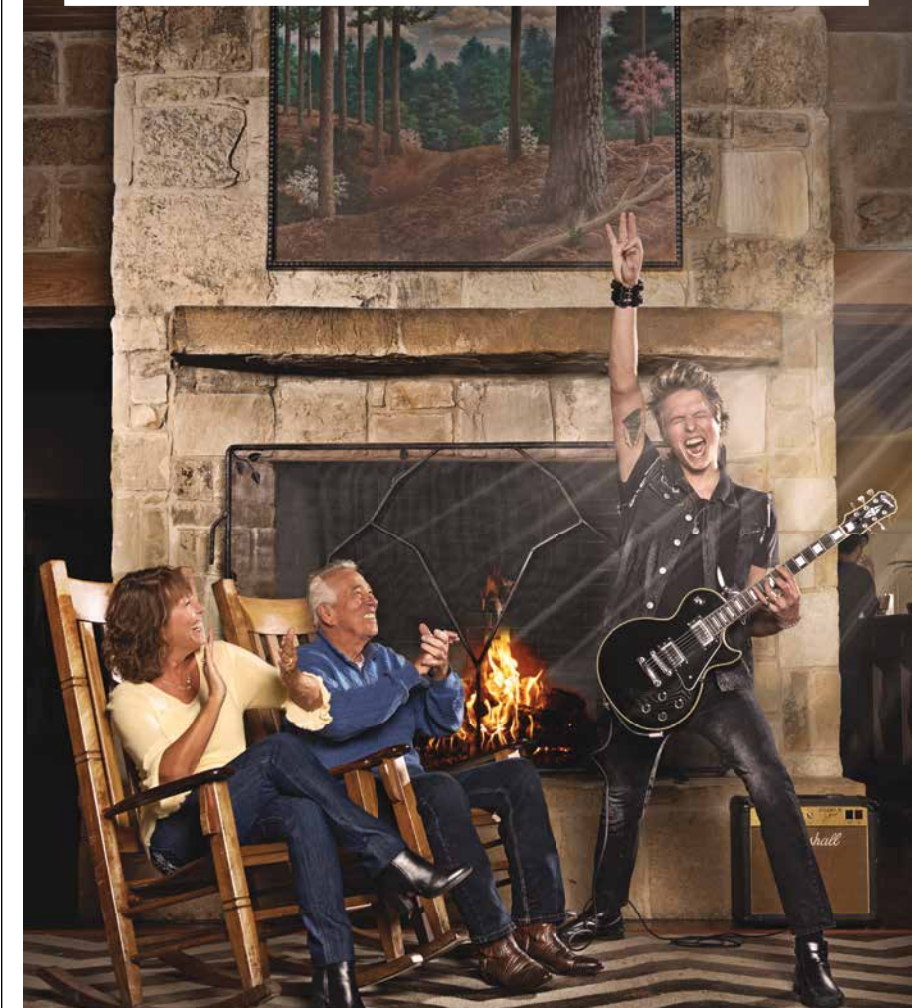
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ISSUE No 77



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and Galveston Island state parks, Galveston Bay, the East End Lagoon Nature Preserve, High Island, the Historic Lagow Ranch, the Katy Prairie, Moody Gardens, the Texas City Prairie Preserve, North Deer Island, Offatts Bayou, Pelican Island, West Isle Marsh, and elsewhere. Most of the field trips cost about \$45 to \$70, while the kids' tours cost \$15 and an overnight pre-festival photography trip to Rockport with nature photographer Larry Ditto is priced at \$700.

During my outing to Bolivar Peninsula, we navigated a bewildering diversity of shorebirds feeding in a muddy, marshy pond on the peninsula, which sits between the shores of Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Many of these shorebirds had migrated from their Central and South American winter homes on a path of roughly 600 nautical miles across the Gulf of Mexico.

"This one's a short-billed dowitcher," pointed out Michael J. Austin, a guide from Pearland. "The best mark early in the spring like this is that the orange [underside] on a short-billed dowitcher is very pale and it ends up in a whitish belly."

"That's a least sandpiper, a little mouse-like bird," added guide Kevin

Karlson. "The under wings have a dark trailing edge."

In the PhotoFest portion of the event, Texas professional photographers, such as Ditto, Scott Buckel, Kathy Adams Clark, Sean Fitzgerald, and Tim Timmis, instruct photographers of all skill levels on the technicalities of shutter speed, aperture, and framing—all with an eye to capturing images of birds and island scenery. For example, Kathy Adams Clark (my wife and my partner in bird guiding adventures) will again this year lead a Saturday morning field trip with Sky King Falconry—a rescue group from the Central Texas town of Paige—to practice taking pictures of raptors in natural settings. Last year, I also accompanied Kathy for the Night

and Long Exposure Beach Photography Field Trip. Held at sunset and after dark at the Galveston Pleasure Pier, Kathy teaches participants the art of photographing magical scenes of glitzy lights against a backdrop of coastal evening sky and seascape.

Back at the Island Community Center, I marveled at the enticing bazaar of birding and photography equipment and memorabilia—all manner of binoculars, spotting scopes, cameras, books, and bird-themed artworks. I also made mental note of workshops to attend in coming years, such as Houston naturalists Bob and Maggie Honig's excursion to identify butterflies and dragonflies at Galveston Island State Park, and Galveston naturalist

Don Wilkerson's kayak trips in the state park.

Dropping in later on some of the classrooms at the center, I was entertained by a Saturday morning children's program on bird identification led by Stennie Meadours, past president of the Houston Audubon Society.

"Galveston is one of the best places to bird," Meadours told the youngsters. "The younger you are when you get interested in birds, the longer you have to enjoy them. So, what do you like about birds?"

One little girl raised her hand: "Well, they're colorful, they're loud, and they fly," she said.

The hundreds of birders attending FeatherFest would certainly agree. ★



PHOTO OP WITH BIRDS

Above, a dowitcher feeds at a Bolivar Peninsula mudflat. At right, photographers train their lenses on a shallow pond on Bolivar Peninsula during FeatherFest.

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Countdown to Spring

BEST BETS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

text by Daniel Blue Tyx illustration by Drue Wagner

DOWN IN THE RIO GRANDE Valley, there's something about springtime, when the palm trees sway in the southerly breeze and even the cacti are blooming, that calls us out into the great outdoors. Pull out your sunglasses, hats, and hiking boots: Here are some recommended activities, roughly ordered from one end of the Valley to the other.

10 Up Close with Dolphins

You may not see them from the shore, but the placid waters of the Laguna Madre are home to a vibrant community of bottlenose dolphins. To see them in all their leaping, chattering glory, book an open-air boat tour with one of several eco-friendly outfitters that depart daily from the docks of Port Isabel and South Padre Island. Sightings are guaranteed!
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There's something about springtime, when the palm trees sway in the southerly breeze and even the cacti are blooming, that calls us out into the great outdoors.

9 To the Lighthouse

Just steps away from the docks, the 1852 Port Isabel Lighthouse once shepherded boats into harbor through the notoriously difficult-to-find Brazos Santiago Pass. Of Texas' original 16 lighthouses, this is the only one that's open to the public. If you climb the 75 steps to the top, a panoramic view rewards your efforts. At the lighthouse's base is a museum dedicated to the keepers who endured both solitude and storms to keep the light shining for more than 50 years.

Call 956/943-0755; www.portisabellighthouse.com.

8 History's Trail

History also awaits at the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park in Brownsville, where the first battle of the Mexican-American War was fought in 1846. Explore the Visitor Center and stroll three trails, one leading to a battlefield overlook and two that lead to the U.S. and Mexican battle lines.

Call 956/541-2785; www.nps.gov.

7 Gorillas in Our Midst

The Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville is one of the country's best zoos, featuring almost 400 species of animals and more than 200 species of plants. The gorillas are the zoo's most famous residents, and feeding the giraffes is a hit with kids and adults alike. Other animals aren't technically zoo residents: The zoo's lush vegetation attracts wild colonies of herons, egrets, ibises, and storks.

Call 956/546-7187; www.gpz.org.

6 Antiques, Boutiques, and Treats

On the first Saturday of every month, downtown Harlingen—vibrant with art galleries, boutiques, and old-fashioned diners—hosts Jackson Street Market Days, when the streets pulse with bands playing Latin jazz and classic two-steppin' country while vendors offer items ranging from tropical plants to handcrafted guitars.

Call 956/423-5440; www.visitharlingentexas.com.



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5 Mansion of Birds

During spring migration, millions of birds headed north for the summer stop in the Rio Grande Valley to rest and refuel. One of the best places to catch up with the flocks is McAllen's Quinta Mazatlan, a restored adobe mansion whose native plant gardens attract an amazing diversity of rare and beau-

tiful birds, as well as visitors ranging from the casual wanderer to the dedicated birdwatcher.

Call 956/681-3370;

www.quintamazatlan.com.

4 Street Food with Style

At McAllen's new outdoor Food Park—located one block southeast of

Archer Park—you can listen to live music and enjoy all the best that the Valley's food-truck movement offers, from wood-fired pizzas and fresh-squeezed juices to real-fruit raspas that will forever change your conception of a snow cone. And of course you'll find some of the best tacos anywhere.

Call 956/682-2871;

www.mcallencvb.com.

Soccer excitement is building for the RGV FC Toros, who will play 30 games in 2016, 15 at the new 9,400-seat stadium in Edinburg.

3 Ready for Some Fútbol

In soccer-crazy South Texas, excitement is building for the RGV FC Toros, a United Soccer League team and an affiliate of Major League Soccer's Houston Dynamo. The Toros will play 30 games in 2016, 15 at the new 9,400-seat stadium in Edinburg. Be ready to sing olé, olé, olé with the crowd!

Call 956/972-1144; www.rgvfc.com.

2 Biking at Bentsen

Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park in Mission offers bike rentals and more than four miles of trails that wind past the park's peaceful resacas, an observation area, and expansive swaths of undisturbed native habitat. Keep your eye out for some of the park's signature birds, including the green jay and a number of different oriole species.

Call 956/584-9156;

www.tpwd.texas.gov.

1 A Retreat in the Trees

At the center of the Casa Luna, one of two B&B lodgings at El Rocio Retreat in Mission, a hundred-year-old mesquite tree serves as the main support of the house. There's no better place than this relaxing, wooded escape to rest and rejuvenate after a full day of springtime outdoor adventure.

Call 956/584-7432;

www.elrocioretreat.com. ★



Following *the Thread*

THE TEXAS COTTON GIN MUSEUM IN BURTON

text by Helen Anders

THE COTTON BOLL IN MY HAND feels light and delicate, and I easily see how it could translate into the soft, comfy shirt I'm wearing. But, then—ouch!—a sharp burr pricks my hand. Having snared my curiosity, the Texas Cotton Gin Museum is about to envelop me in cotton lore: how the white puff in my hand speaks of a painful history of slavery; how the cotton gin revolutionized cotton farming without significantly enriching its inventor; how cotton remained an important crop for Cotton Belt farmers after the Civil War; and how a really tiny insect threatens the shirt on my back.

Located in Burton, about 10 miles west of Brenham, the museum and its historic gin explore the history of what



THE TEXAS COTTON GIN MUSEUM is at 307 N. Main St. in Burton. Hours are Tue-Sat 10-4 with tours at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Entry is free; tours cost \$6 for adults and \$4 for students. Call 979/289-3378; www.cottonginmuseum.org.

remains the state's largest cash crop (even though China and India now produce most of the world's cotton). Burton-area farmers opened the cooperative gin in 1914 to serve the booming cotton industry. It operated for 60 years—first on steam, then oil, then electricity—before closing in 1974. By then, facing the advent of polyester, labor shortages, and government production controls, many small cotton farmers had turned to cattle and dairy.

But in 1992, the old gin again revved its 125-horsepower Bessemer Type IV oil engine and began ginning cotton



DETOUR

once a year for the annual Cotton Gin Festival, held the third Friday and Saturday in April (April 15-16 this year). The rest of the time, it welcomes tourists for a look at how cotton lint—the white fluff that becomes thread—gets separated from seeds, stems, hulls, and other extraneous matter.

“Our main goal is to keep the legacy of cotton alive for visitors and future generations,” says Linda Russell, the museum’s director. “It’s not just about Burton. It’s all the little cotton towns in the Cotton Belt through the ages.”

Before my companions and I go out to see the gin, we learn about cotton in the small, one-room museum lined with display cases of cotton and cottonseed products, from thread to coffee filters, Crisco, and cattle feed cubes. We gather around a table in the middle of the room, where Russell passes around cotton bolls for us to feel the soft lint

and the hardened, sharp-tipped burr.

She tells us about the old process of handpicking cotton, which was, in a word, painful. Not only did the pickers suffer pricks that made their hands bleed, they also had to drag along heavy sacks. A 12-foot-long sack would hold up to 100 pounds of cotton, Russell says, and men typically filled those sacks several times a day. A good picker could pick 300 to 350 pounds of seed cotton a day.

Plantation owners originally relied on slave labor to separate the hulls and seeds by hand, producing about a pound of cotton and two pounds of seeds in 10 hours. But in 1793, Eli Whitney invented an engine—called “gin” for short—that cleaned as much cotton in one day as 50 people could by hand. The museum has a small hand-cranked model of Whitney’s gin—not much bigger than a breadbox—and we

watch as its wire hooks and brushes pull the loose cotton fibers away from the hull and seeds. Cotton gins eventually moved from steam to oil to electricity, and today’s technology can yield 100 bales an hour, Russell says.

Shortly after Whitney and partner Phineas Miller patented his machine, one Henry Ogden Holmes patented a similar machine, and the resulting court battle tied up production of the gin. Farmers, Russell says, wound up building their own gins. Thus, Whitney’s profits didn’t soar. What did soar was the demand for slave labor to pick cotton. After slavery was abolished, many slaves stayed on as sharecroppers and kept picking cotton until 1940 and the introduction of industrial cotton-picking machines.

Texas cotton farming encountered a formidable enemy in the 1890s when the boll weevil moved into the state



GENERATIONS OF GINNING

This oil engine powered Burton’s cotton gin from 1925 to 1963—and is still used for annual demonstrations.

PHOTO: Kevin Stillman

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from Mexico, destroying crops from the Rio Grande Valley to the Sabine and Red rivers. Its legend looms large, but the beetle itself typically measures around one-sixteenth to one-eighth of an inch. Russell passes around a plastic-encased boll weevil, scarcely bigger than a fruit fly, with a long snout. Adult weevils lay eggs on the cotton plants, and the larvae devour the developing bolls. To keep infestations down, cotton farmers destroy all cotton plants between growing seasons, and mandatory traps track weevil infestations.

Russell serves up more surprises: Although most cotton we see today is white, it also comes in brown, green, red, and blue. American paper currency is mostly cotton: 75 percent cotton, 25 percent linen. That's why we find our bucks whole at the end of the laundry cycle.

What happens to all the cottonseed left over from the ginning? Russell



BURTON COTTON GIN FESTIVAL

The Texas Cotton Gin Museum will gin cotton in its historic 1914 gin at 3 p.m. April 16 as part of the Burton Cotton Gin Festival (April 15-16). The festival also includes a parade, antique tractors and engines, folklife demonstrators spinning and weaving cotton, craft vendors, and more.

explains that cows like to eat it, and their multiple stomachs can digest it. Cottonseed is also used to make household products such as cooking oils, mayonnaise, toothpaste, and soap.

After a short film about the history of ginning cotton, Jerry Moore, the museum curator, takes us outside behind the museum to see the massive gin building, made of cypress wood and tin.

During the festival, volunteers will

gin cotton, but today we look at the machinery as Moore explains the process. We see a carport-like structure at the edge of the building, where a pneumatic tube would suck a wagonload of cotton into the ginning machine. Inside the structure, an oil-driven combustion engine—purchased by the gin in 1925—runs the gin. We climb stairs to see the machines that remove the seeds and hulls from the cotton lint, which then is blown into a press that mashes the cotton 15 feet down to the first floor and forms it into a bale. Bound with metal straps and tagged with a label identifying its bale number and ginning location, an average bale weighs about 500 pounds.

The entire process, we're told, takes about 12 minutes. Then, the bale slides down a chute and back onto the wagon to be taken to market, eventually to wind up on beds, in baths, and well beyond. ★



Poet's Paradise

POETRY AT ROUND TOP INSPIRES SPRINGTIME BARDS

text by Clayton Maxwell illustration by Scott Baldwin

“CLAYTON, LOOK AT THIS MOTH” shouts the poet Sharon Olds, calling to me across the green lawn in front of the concert hall at Round Top’s Festival Institute. Despite having just met her, I am not surprised to have one of the world’s most renowned contemporary poets call out to me about a moth on a car. This kind of eager, open delight in small beauties seems normal at Poetry at Round Top, a festival that San Antonio poet Naomi Shihab Nye has dubbed “Paradise for Poets.”

In the full bloom of springtime, the festival’s home—the romantic, rambling 200-acre campus of Round Top Festival Institute, one of the most respected classical music venues in the country—lends itself honestly to such comparisons to paradise. With venues such as the ornate 1,000-seat Festival Concert Hall, transplanted Victorian homes with wrap-around front porches, and a 19th-Century chapel that feels like

The easygoing friendliness of the festival makes it possible to talk to some of the best poets writing today.

a sacred temple amid lush green lawns, the campus itself transports you to a poetic state of mind.

The easygoing friendliness of the festival makes it possible to talk to some of the best poets writing today. People I’ve never met invite me to join them in reciting poetry at lunch, whisk me aside to show me a bird’s nest with three pale blue eggs hidden in a rose bush, or simply stop me to tell me about their favorite poetry book. This openness to others and to the world around us defines Poetry at Round Top, where poets of all levels, ages, and styles gather around the proverbial campfire to share their love of words.

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FESTIVAL HILL
Poets from across the nation meet at Round Top Festival Institute in April to share their love of verse.

April now for 15 years, this little bit of lyrical heaven stands out as one of the top poetry festivals in the country, attracting celebrity poets such as last year's Ellen Bass and Richard Blanco, the Cuban-American who wrote and delivered the inaugural poem for President Obama's second inauguration. Two U.S. Poet Laureates have graced the festival: W.S. Merwin, who was here the day before his honor was announced, and Ted Kooser, a Nebraska farmer-turned-poet who drove down to the festival in his truck.

That one of the country's most inspiring poetry festivals should be thriving in Round Top is the result of a shared vision and much diligence by festival co-founders and former Michener fellows Jack Brannon and Dorothy Barnett, along with James Dick, the founder of the Round Top Festival Institute, which has flourished here since 1971.

"James called me about 15 years ago and said, 'Jack, I've always wanted poetry

out here. Could you start something up?'" explains Brannon. "And I said yes, because there are a lot of wonderful poets here, so we decided we'd start with Texas poets and see how it goes."

These days, the featured talent comes from across the nation as well as Texas, while the 150-200 attendees hail mostly from the Lone Star State. Both Brannon and Barnett have retired from running the festival, but Co-Director Katherine Oldmixon, a poet and English professor at Huston-Tillotson University, now carries on the mission with Brannon's godson, Jesse Bertron, a poet in his own right.

The festival's offerings are varied, including formal readings and panels on such topics as "The Language of Poetry" in the main concert hall, open-mic readings, and casual readings that seem to happen organically. There are the smaller workshops with the established poets; these are very popular and require advance registration. In

the chapel, a remembrance ceremony called "Distance Prevails Not" features poetry from artists who have died since the last gathering. There are book signings by the authors, opportunities to purchase books and journals, manuscript-critique sessions with accomplished poets, and intimate readings that take place after dinner over wine and candlelight.

At an evening reading in the stone basement beneath the chapel, I meet Richard Royall, the soft-spoken managing director of the Round Top Festival Institute, who tells me as he pours red wine into my plastic cup: "I know it is spring because the poets have arrived." Along with the bluebonnets dotting the green fields around the Festival Institute campus, I can think of no better harbinger of spring.

"One reason I really do love the festival," says Brannon, "is that it offers poetry at its best. I want people to experience



POETRY AT ROUND TOP

This year's event takes place April 15-17 at the Festival Institute. Weekend passes cost \$100; daily passes available as well. The 2016 lineup includes Robert Hass, Terrance Hayes, Carmen Tafolla, Dorianne Laux, and others. To register, see www.poetryatroundtop.org.

how truly wonderful it can be to hear poetry read out loud, under the right circumstances. Not all poetry readings are wonderful, so one of my goals is to show how very wonderful they can be."

I am lucky enough to sit in on a workshop titled "What is Metaphor?" by one of my very favorite poets, California-based Ellen Bass. This warm, wise woman speaks about how a metaphor invites us to find similarities in a world that is constantly focusing on

TEXAS TICKET

differences. When we say, "this is like that," she explains, we get a glimpse into the oneness of the world. In the cozy living room of a Victorian home, she gives us objects to hold in our hands, and we then brainstorm for metaphors; for example, a string of amber beads in a plastic baggie becomes a gaggle of debutantes waiting for a party. This is fun.

And then, for the rest of the weekend, I see metaphor everywhere, even though this particular poetic talent is not one I come by easily. And I realize how Bass' exploration into metaphor actually serves as a metaphor for the whole weekend: Here we are, MFA students, professional and aspiring poets, and a few random poetry lovers like me—all seemingly very different in so many ways. But this weekend, deeply steeped in our mutual love of the art, we are united by the happy similarities between us, even if we share something as simple as the sight of a moth on a car. ★

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CLINT ORMS ENGRAVERS AND SILVERSMITHS IN INGRAM

text by Sallie Lewis

FOR CLINT ORMS, BELT BUCKLES ARE more than just accessories. The silversmith sees them as a vestige of Western tradition—tools to be used and enjoyed, and then passed along as family heirlooms.

“I believe if you put your best work out, there’s a pretty good chance someone is going to feel that when they pick it up,” says Orms, whose craftsmanship adorns the belts of such notable Texans as Nolan Ryan, Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, and

Behind the showroom, visitors can get a look at the silversmithing process with guided tours of the workshop.

Ben Crenshaw, as well as fans around the world.

Orms creates these collectibles of silver and gold in a busy workshop in the hamlet of Ingram, about six miles west of Kerrville and a stone’s throw from the Guadalupe River. He and other artists in The Old Ingram Loop Shopping District—including bronze sculptor Tom Moss and pastel painter Kathleen Cook—add a splash of color to this neck of the Texas Hill Country.

Inside Clint Orms Engravers and Silversmiths, mounted steer horns evoke ranch life, while framed magazine clippings from the likes of *VOGUE*, *Texas Farm & Ranch*, *Newsweek*, and *American Cowboy* depict celebrities wearing Orms’ buckles. Dyed belts hang from leather tabs on the walls, and in the center of the store, glass cases

display dozens of handcrafted silver and gold buckles.

Clint Orms is a calm-natured, soft-spoken man with horn-rimmed glasses and light brown hair tinted with silver—a fitting reflection of his handiwork. Orms grew up in Wichita Falls, surrounded by Western influences from an early age. His father worked at The Cow Lot, the town’s premier Western wear store. As a teenager, Orms made leather belts, and by the age of 16, he was working with silver after a family friend and Western sculptor encouraged him to learn.

As the young Orms began doing silverwork in his garage, he soon realized that there was an enduring, timeless, multi-generational component to sterling silver buckles that leather belts did not possess. Over the next 20 years, Orms worked as an engraver in California, Nevada, and Australia, where he was introduced to a wider spectrum of design and marketing. In 1992 he began his business in Dallas, later moving to Houston, and finally to Ingram in 2003.

Behind the showroom, visitors can get a look at the silversmithing process with guided tours of the workshop. Country music blends with the sounds of hammers, screw presses, silver cutters, welding machines, and engraving tools as the silversmiths and engravers work each piece of metal. Next to Orms’ desk, a large storage cabinet with thin drawers holds sheets of silver and gold, as well as parts and precious gemstones, like rubies and sapphires. The workshop employs 14 people, ranging in age from 23 to 85.

At the silversmiths’ workstations, wooden carousels filled with tools sit alongside instruments like jewelers’



SILVERSMITHING
In Orms’ workshop, a craftsman uses an acetylene torch to melt silver before pouring it into an ingot mold.



CLINT ORMS ENGRAVERS AND SILVERSMITHS is at 229b Old Ingram Loop. The shop opens Mon-Fri 9-5 and Sat 10-4. Call in advance for workshop tours, 830/367-7949; www.clintorms.com.

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SET IN STERLING

Clint Orms personalizes the designs of his custom belt buckles to reflect the customer's interests.

saws, which are studded with microscopic teeth. With focus and finesse, the craftsmen use these small saws to filigree the silver and bring a depth to the buckle that helps distinguish Clint Orms' style.

Orms says roughly half of his sales are stock merchandise, including belt buckles and other items like hatpins, money clips, cuff links, and bracelets. These items range in price from about \$110 to \$3,000. The other half of the business is custom, which starts at \$200

and can exceed \$20,000, depending on labor, materials, and any precious jewels used.

Designing a custom buckle is a journey of creativity and personal expression for both Orms and his customers. The process starts with Orms' hand-drawn design, incorporating his expertise and the customer's personal interests. Orms then customizes the bespoke buckles with individual touches like initials, alma maters, birthstones, and livestock brands.

MADE IN TEXAS

After the design, layout, and cutting, the silversmiths solder the various pieces of the buckle together. If the design work includes filigree, this is performed prior to polishing and engraving, patina, and yet more polishing.

Designing a custom buckle is a journey of creativity and personal expression for both Orms and his customers. The process starts with Orms' hand-drawn design, incorporating his expertise and the customer's personal interests.

Orms distinguishes his work with small details, often using natural symbolism in his designs. For example, the scrollwork in his buckles is a subtle replication of the natural spiral patterns found in shells and throughout nature, and his buckle tongues are miniature saddle horns. Another distinction are the designs that Orms puts on the backs of his buckles, each different and echoing motifs from the front. He says one of his greatest satisfactions is watching customers turn his buckles over. "It's like they've discovered something," he says.

Orms' buckles balance Western heritage with a formal aesthetic, and he cleverly carves a Texas mentality into each of them by naming different styles after Texas counties, such as Bexar or Pecos. (Orms wears the Duval, a three-quarter-inch, guitar-shaped buckle featuring the Bar C brand of a friend's ranch in West Texas.) "I love what our buckles do to enhance the image of Texas," he says.

Although each finished product is slightly different because of the nature of the materials and the hands that work them, all represent Orms' commitment to endurance and grace—and his dedication to making buckles that will carry on for generations to come. ★



- ◆ San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts Ceramics Invitational Apr. 15-16
- ◆ Nelson McGee Memorial Bluegrass Festival Apr. 8-9
- ◆ San Angelo Cultural Affairs Council "Uncorked & Untapped" Apr. 29
- ◆ Simply Texas Blues Festival May 14

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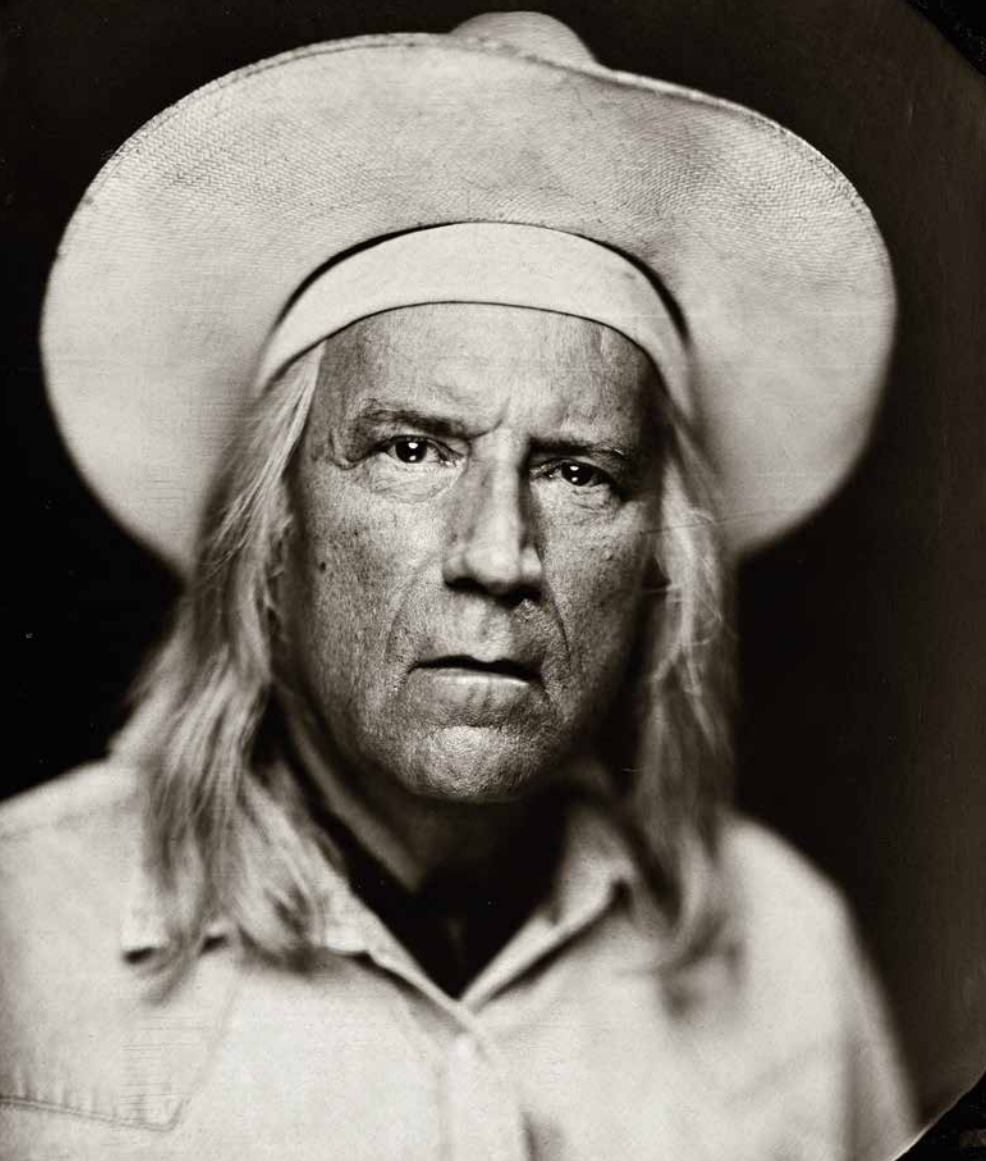
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Pure Resolution

WHAT WOULD YOUR PHOTO HAVE LOOKED LIKE A CENTURY AGO? WITH A LUMIERE TINTYPE, WONDER NO MORE.

text by Gene Fowler

OKAY, I ADMIT IT. I STILL LIKE TO play Cowboys and Indians. I'm fascinated by vintage images of frontier days and the Old West. The modern world with all its geegaws and gadgets is stimulating and fun, but my imagination really sings when it wanders into the territory that cowboy balladeer Don Edwards has described as "west of yesterday."

I was blown away, then, when I discovered the resurgence in popularity of an antique photographic medium called the tintype. Modern-day tintypes are images that look like they've captured a moment from pioneer days. Even



LUMIERE TINTYPE

The Lumiere Tintype studio is at Justine's Brasserie (a restaurant at 4710 E. 5th St.) in Austin, indefinitely. Learn more at www.lumieretintype.com.

the name sounds old-timey. I first became aware of the process a decade or so ago thanks to the stunning, handmade images of Texas cowboys taken by photographer Robb Kendrick. And when I learned that a cool cat from England named Adrian Whipp was making tintypes in Austin, I parked my bones in front of his large-format camera with its 120-year-old Schneider lens and faced the ever-so-briefly-blinding light of its flash.

Whipp calls his photography studio Lumiere Tintype, and he runs it with his wife, Loren Doyen. It's actually a studio on wheels, housed in a custom-built trailer that can be pulled behind a vehicle. When the studio is not on the road, portrait-seekers flock to it at Justine's Brasserie, a lively French bistro in east Austin. Around the state, the couple has parked the studio and created images at the Webb Gallery in Waxahachie, at Peachtree Gallery and the Charles Adams Studio Project in Lubbock, and at Big Bend Coffee Roasters in Marfa.

The tintype photographic process was patented by a fellow named Hamilton L. Smith of Ohio in 1856. Whipp told me that it started to die out in the early 1900s as traditional cameras became available, but tintypes had a good run for a few more decades as sideshow attractions. "People today are really drawn to the process because we literally make a photograph on a sheet of metal," he continued. "First, I coat the plate with a substance called collodion. It was used as a liquid bandage during the Civil War. Then I soak the plate in silver nitrate to make it sensitive to light. That's why they call it 'wet plate' photography."

After he loads the plate in the camera, he watches his subject for the best moment to hit the shutter. "With the tintype process, the ISO—the measurement of how sensitive film is to light—is very low, so you need a lot of light when you hit the shutter." He wasn't kidding. The flash of light was so bright I feared I had blinked and messed up the

photograph. "You blink a half second after the flash," Whipp reassured me. "The image is always on the metal before people can blink."

Next, he removes the plate from the camera and takes it to the small darkroom in the studio. "We pour developer on the plate for about 30 seconds," Whipp continued. "It's a recipe of ferrous sulphate and alcohol. Then the image starts to reveal itself, and it takes a minute to see details." He stops the development process by flooding the plate with water and then applies a fixative to make the image stable. "It's often magical when people first see the images," he said. "They're not used to seeing someone make a photograph by hand." As the last step, he dries the plate and varnishes it with shellac, lavender oil, and grain alcohol.

Whipp describes the tintypes as black-and-white images with "coffee and cream tones" that result from the

iron in the developer and the golden tint of the shellac varnish. Lumiere tintypes cost \$60 for the 5x7-inch size and \$110 for 8x10s. The physical image is on an aluminum plate, which takes about 30 minutes to produce, and Whipp also provides a high-resolution digital copy. Instructions for tintype care are included on the back of the plate.

Whipp never imagined he would take up an antique technique when he graduated from Leeds College of Art in 2007. "I had studied analog photography, and when I got out, suddenly everything had gone digital. It was a little disorienting." The Brit first visited Austin for his other passion, BMX biking, met his wife here, and soon was a Texan himself. He got into the tintype business mainly on a whim. "I loved the look of tintypes, old and new, and wanted to learn the process. So I got some books, hit the Internet, and proceeded through lots of trial and error. The transition to

full-blown business was actually very rapid, since I immediately fell in love with the process. My friends and family did too, and demanded that I photograph them. It didn't take long for me to start daydreaming about how to open a full-time tintype studio."

When I stopped by Lumiere last December, Whipp was just finishing up a tintype of a dog, and the couple after me was posing for a Christmas card. They were from Los Angeles, and the husband was a film-industry photography director who found the tintype process fascinating. "Honey, this looks great," beamed the wife when she saw their image appear on the plate. "That's pretty rad," the husband agreed.

"That's the reason people love tintypes so much," Whipp said after the two disappeared into Justine's for dinner. "It's a grainless photograph, so there's nothing between you and the image. It's pure resolution." ★

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TEXAS TICKET

Baile, Conjunto Style

TEX-MEX ROOTS AT SAN ANTONIO'S
TEJANO CONJUNTO FESTIVAL

text by MICHAEL CORCORAN



ACCORDION TIME

Santiago Jiménez Jr. performs at the 2015 festival. His brother, Flaco Jiménez, is on the bill for this May's event.

IN THESE MODERN TIMES, THE WORDS “music festival” make me think of Jumbotrons and multiple stages, \$225 wristbands and the Foo Fighters. There’s none of that at the Tejano Conjunto Festival, a celebration of Tex-Mex accordion music that started in San Antonio in 1982 and maintains an old school feel as it enters its 35th year this May.

The festival, taking place May 11-15, is held in a no-frills pavilion in Rosedale Park on the West Side, with beer, food, and souvenir booths. So even though Tejano Conjunto fest was the first festival to feature conjunto music and presents the top names of the genre every year, it’s more of a *baile* than a blowout.

The setting is just right for the members of “Table 99,” about two dozen conjunto maniacs from Houston who trek to San Antonio each May for the dancing and camaraderie. Their tables are usually next to the Polka Dawgs, a “rival” dance club from San Antonio. “We’ve got our colors on,” jokes Forrest

This year’s Tejano Conjunto Festival includes the San Antonio premiere of Nicolás Valdez’s *Conjunto Blues* (7 p.m. May 12), a theatrical multimedia performance that explores the origins of conjunto music and culture.

Armstrong of Table 99, whose members wear custom shirts embroidered with the club’s name. “But we’re all friends.” How could there not be an affinity among couples that drive hundreds of miles to dance for hours and hours?

“We attend dances and festivals all over South Texas,” says Armstrong, “and the Tejano Conjunto in San Antonio always has the top performers. And then if you can’t get enough, there are festival parties at local nightclubs.”

The daytime activities of the event, sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, include a seminar on accordion tuning and repairs, showcases of youth accordionists, and a senior citizens dance. The Arts Center hosts the activities at its 376-seat indoor

Guadalupe Theater, built in 1942 and wonderfully restored.

Conjunto music is the fusion of German polkas, introduced to Texas by Czech, German, and Polish settlers, and Mexico’s 12-string *bajo sexto* guitar. It’s a musical form born in Texas dance halls in the late 1800s, with the primary purpose of filling the wooden floors with hard-core dancers.

“You can’t separate the dancing and the music in conjunto,” says Juan Tejeda, who founded Tejano Conjunto fest in conjunction with the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. At Rosedale Park, the festival crowd readily fills the large concrete dance floor, which is shaded by a metal awning and surrounded by picnic tables and oak trees bearing their bright green leaves of May.

Although “Tejano” is an umbrella term that covers Tex-Mex music, accordion-fueled conjunto is the focus of Tejeda’s musical booking. “The main requirement to play the festival is that you have an accordion in the group,” says Tejeda, a music instructor at Palo Alto College. Some of the more progressive bands use synthesizers and electric bass for a fuller sound, but at the core is the squeezebox.

Honoring the heritage of conjunto music is a primary theme of the festival. “There’s a formula to the booking,” says Tejeda. “First of all, we’ve gotta bring in the legends who are still alive. Then, of course, we try to book the most popular acts.” Also, the festival inducts musicians each year into its Conjunto Music Hall of Fame.

Several performers on the bill for 2016 have already been inducted, among them Flaco Jiménez, the legendary San Antonio accordionist known partly for his crossover work with the Texas Tornados; Boni Mauricio y Los Maximos, from Corpus Christi; and Eva Ybarra, a San Antonio accordion master known as “The Queen of Conjunto Music.”

Bands from South Texas make up most of the schedule, such as Los Texmaniacs, a San Antonio group that won the Best Tejano Album Grammy Award in 2010, and Los Fantomas del



TEJANA POWER
Blanca Rosa, above, and Eva Ybarra perform at last year’s festival. Ybarra, the “Queen of Conjunto Music,” returns this year.

PHOTOS: Will van Overbeek

FIELD GUIDE *to* **BASTROP COUNTY** ISSUE No 05



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TEXAS TICKET

Valle and Los Monarcas de Pete y Mario Diaz of Houston. But other regions are also represented. This year's performers include The Hometown Boys, from Lubbock, and all the way from the Netherlands, Dutch phenom Dwayne Verheyden, perhaps the only Tex-Mex accordion virtuoso in his home country.

Tejeda also works to book new acts that have never performed at the Tejano Conjunto Festival. Fresh faces this year include Conjunto Cats from Seguin, Los Nuevos Chachos de Jesse Gomez from Mission, and Conjunto Delta Boyz of Elsa. Tejeda's budget for talent is only \$30,000 for three full days of music, so there's a balance between established acts who command greater fees and new acts who play the fest for exposure—a proud achievement in the industry.

During the early 1990s, when Selena's rise spiked the popularity of Tejano, the festival expanded and used multiple stages, but these days it's back to the simpler one-stage setting—a format that Tejeda prefers because fans can catch all of the bands.

"It's a relatively small festival," says Tejeda, "but the impact has been pretty huge when you think about all the unknown acts who started out here. In May, San Antonio becomes the center of the conjunto universe for all of the United States, and increasingly Mexico and other parts of the world. We're very proud of that. We were the first festival dedicated to conjunto music and we're still going strong." ★



THE 35TH ANNUAL TEJANO CONJUNTO FESTIVAL IN SAN ANTONIO

is May 11-15 at Rosedale Park, 303 Dartmouth St., and the Guadalupe Theater, 1301 Guadalupe St. A festival pass covering three days of music at Rosedale Park is \$40, while a one-day ticket costs \$12 to \$15. www.guadalupeculturalarts.org.



MADE IN TEXAS

Ship Sharp

HISTORIC VESSELS REPURPOSED AT THE KNIFE SHOP IN LUFKIN

text by Heather Brand

A LONG THE TEXAS GULF COAST, a series of decommissioned ships navigate the nation's maritime history. In Galveston, the 1877 tall ship *Elissa* recalls the waning days of international sailing ship commerce while the submarine USS *Cavalla* chronicles the deep-sea battlegrounds of World War II and the Cold War. In La Porte and Corpus Christi, respectively, the imposing Battleship *Texas* and aircraft carrier USS *Lexington* reflect the American Naval might of the 20th-Century world wars.

As floating museums, these ships offer a rare educational experience, but they also face difficult maintenance problems—metal corrosion and wood rot are common; upkeep

Knife maker Percy Richardson has created a series of knives using metal and wood discarded from these vessels during renovations to raise funds for their support.

is constant and expensive. Recognizing an innovative opportunity to help, the Lufkin-based knife maker Percy Richardson has created a series of knives using metal and wood discarded from these vessels during renovations to raise funds for their support. In 2014, Richardson, working with his wife Lynne and sons Rich and Aaron, launched the America's Fighting Ships Knives series with a signature knife for the *Texas*. They followed it up in 2015 with knives for the *Lexington*, *Cavalla*, and *Elissa*.

"He's taken scrap and has made



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MADE IN TEXAS



For each ship, Richardson initially produces about 100 folding knives and between 10 and 20 straight knives, with additional straight knives available on demand.

something artistic out of it," says Andy Smith, ship manager of the *Texas*. "The knives are jaw-droppingly gorgeous and wildly popular. When you hold it in your hand, the craftsmanship is amazing, but also you think about how that piece of metal has been around the world and fought in two world wars. It's like owning a piece of history."

A native of Hemphill, Richardson taught himself how to make jewelry before turning to knife making in 1989. What started as a hobby soon led to custom orders from hunters, and he opened his own shop in 1991. "I'm just a self-taught country boy," Richardson professes. But he's also a perfectionist

with an eye for detail. His artistry is evident in the smooth, carved handles and precisely shaped blades of his straight knives, which he makes in his shop in Lufkin, The Knife Shop. Because of the demand for the ship series' folding knives, Richardson outsources their fabrication to Great Eastern Cutlery in Pennsylvania, which helps him keep up with production volumes. The ship knives now make up about 60 percent of his business.

Richardson's workroom at the back of his shop is full of saws, sanders, and raw materials. File cabinets hold such exotic items as a whale's tooth and the tusks of warthogs and walruses, to be

fashioned into handles. One drawer contains, among other things, a wooden block labeled "TX 1912-14"; it's a piece of the *Texas*' original teak decking before it was replaced with pine (Richardson has some of that pine on hand, too).

He also has teak—for centuries a prized boatbuilding wood because of its durability and natural resistance to rot—from the decks of the *Lexington* and *Cavalla*, and from the 1877 captain's quarters of the *Elissa*. Richardson carves these wood blocks into knife handles and uses reclaimed metal for their blades. *Texas*' metal comes from an engine brace; the *Cavalla*'s from a bulkhead; the *Lexington*'s from anchor chain; and the *Elissa*'s from the hull.

"There are lots of knife makers that make collectible knives, but these are the most historical," Richardson asserts. They're exclusive as well, because Richardson has 10-year contracts with the ships for rights to



USS *Texas* straight knife in progress

use salvaged material for knives.

The recycled ship metal is usually too soft to be used for cutlery, so Richardson first sends the material to Devin Thomas of Panaca, Nevada, a knife maker and expert producer of Damascus steel. Thomas combines the salvaged ship metal with a harder grade of steel in a process that strengthens the metal and adorns the surface with

decorative patterns reminiscent of wood grain, flowing water, or fingerprints.

At The Knife Shop, stacks of Damascus steel billets—thick sheets of metal that measure about 5-by-18 inches—rest on a worktable. Richardson selects a different blade pattern for each annual series; the 2014 *Texas* knife blades had a raindrop pattern, while the *Lexington*, *Cavalla*, and *Elissa* blades have

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a ladder pattern. For the *Elissa*, the only merchant ship in the series, he also varied the shape of the blade, producing a blunt-tipped rigging knife, typical of those used on sailing vessels.

Richardson ensures that all of the elements of his knives are produced in the United States. Even their walnut-and-oak display cases are handmade in the

town of Oakwood, by Meadows Display Cases. In his shop, Richardson spends about eight hours on each straight knife, first shaping the blade using a band saw and belt grinder, and then carving the handle using a drill press and sander.

For each ship, Richardson initially produces about 100 folding knives and between 10 and 20 straight knives, with

additional straight knives available on demand. The folding knives cost \$395 and can be shipped overnight; the straight knives start at \$600 and can take two weeks to a few months to complete, depending on customization. The larger Bowie knives, measuring about a foot in length, start at \$1,000. Richardson sells the knives at his shop and by phone order. The *Lexington* and *Elissa* knives are also available in the gift shops on those ships.

Richardson donates a portion of the sales price back to the ships: \$50 each for the first 100 sold of each series, and then \$100 for each additional knife sold. Also, Richardson says he often donates additional knives for auction or raffle, and gives \$10 per knife to local Wounded Warrior projects. To date, the initiative has raised more than \$20,000 for the Battleship *Texas* alone, Smith says.

Richardson intends to produce knives for 15 ships in need throughout the United States, with plans to focus on about three new ships every year until 2020. In 2016 he will create knives for Battleship *New Jersey* in Camden, New Jersey, and the aircraft carriers USS *Hornet*, in Alameda, California, and USS *Nimitz*, in Bremerton, Washington. Richardson hopes that his knives will support these ships in their battle to stay afloat for years to come. ★

THE KNIFE SHOP

opens Tue-Fri 9-5 and Sat 9-2. The shop is located at 1508 Atkinson Dr. in Lufkin. At press time, the shop planned to move in May to a new facility at 7000 US 69 South. Call 936/634-1690; www.americasfightingshipsknives.com.

The ship knives cost \$395 for folding knives and start at \$600 for straight knives. Richardson donates \$50 each for the first 100 sold of each series back to the ship, and then \$100 for each additional knife sold.

See the Sights... and Save

TOP ATTRACTIONS MADE AFFORDABLE IN HOUSTON AND DALLAS

text by Mai Pham illustration by WACSO

ANYONE WHO TRAVELS TO A big city for vacation knows that apart from lodging, food, and shopping splurges, the other big expense—especially if you have a family—is admission to attractions. Those costs can be shaved by at least 40 percent in Dallas and Houston, thanks to a program called CityPASS.

CityPASS launched its program in San Francisco and Seattle about 20 years ago. The idea behind it was simple: Pick the top attractions in each city, bundle them together in a booklet that could be used over a period of nine days, and offer the pass as a discounted package deal at a savings of close to 50 percent off individual ticket prices.

Admission to select attractions can be shaved by at least 40 percent in Dallas and Houston.

These days, CityPASS is offered in 12 U.S. cities and regions, and travelers purchase more than a million booklets per year. In Texas, CityPASS Houston has been available since 2008, while Dallas got its CityPASS in 2015. Let's look at what a trip with CityPASS could look like in each of these cities.

Houston CityPASS

For \$56 per adult (age 12 and older), and \$46 per child, the Houston CityPASS grants you access to five Houston attractions, including Space Center Houston, the Downtown Aquarium,



all clear

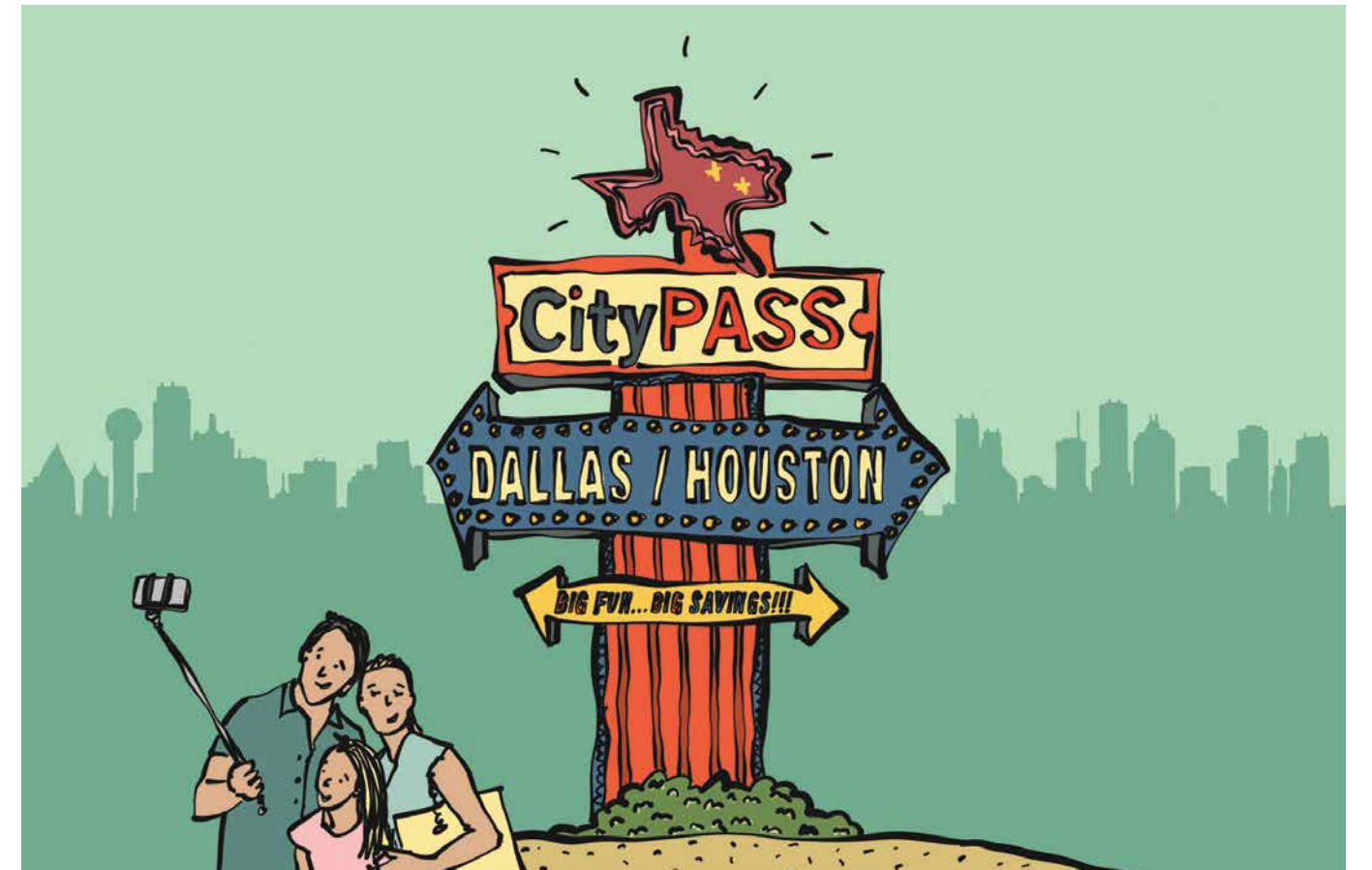
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the Houston Museum of Natural Science, either the Houston Zoo or the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and your choice of the Kemah Boardwalk or the Children's Museum of Houston.

Let's say you want to spend the first afternoon doing something easygoing. Your first excursion could take you to either the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, or to the manicured grounds of the Houston Zoo, where you'll want to note the various animals' feeding schedules before checking out the lions, gorillas, monkeys, birds, and reptiles. Make a beeline for the wonderful giraffe habitat, where, if you're lucky, you'll get to feed romaine lettuce leaves to several of the spectacularly long-necked creatures.

The next day, you might make the 40-minute drive to Space Center Houston, where your CityPASS lets you breeze by the long lines as you channel your inner astronaut. Feel what it's like when a shuttle launches at the Blast-Off Theater, inspect the life-size *Galileo Seven* shuttlecraft from "Star

Trek," then head to Independence Plaza to explore the replica of the shuttle *Independence* and its NASA 905 shuttle carrier aircraft. Finish the journey with a 90-minute NASA Tram Tour through the 1,600-acre Johnson Space Center (tickets are timed, so you'll want to book yours online ahead of time to avoid lines).

Perhaps you'll want to take a break for a day to do some shopping at the Galleria mall. The CityPASS gives you the flexibility to have non-excursion days because you have nine days to use it.

When you're ready for more arts and culture, however, you could spend several hours at the wonderland that is the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Stop by the Morian Hall of Paleontology to marvel at the dinosaur skeletons on display, and don't leave without taking



CITYPASS

For more information or to purchase booklets, visit www.citypass.com.

a peek at the beautiful jewelry gleaming in the gem vault.

With just three attractions under your belt, your Houston CityPASS has already more than paid for itself. If you still have time, however, your booklet also contains a ticket for the Downtown Aquarium, and a choice between an outing at the Children's Museum of Houston or an afternoon on the waterfront Kemah Boardwalk, either of which will make a fine conclusion to your stay in Space City.

Dallas CityPASS

Dallas' CityPASS bundles your choice of four of Big D's most popular attractions into a booklet that costs \$46 per adult (age 12 and older) and \$31 per child.

You'll want to spend an afternoon at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, a state-of-the-art learning space named for the family of entrepreneur and billionaire Ross Perot. The

dinosaur exhibit, an 11,000-square-foot space where you can acquaint yourself with a *Tyrannosaurus rex* and other prehistoric animals, is stunning, as are the 10 other permanent exhibit halls, which let you explore the universe, learn about your body, discover rare minerals, and experience a tornado via a simulation exhibit.

For step two in your CityPASS booklet, take the elevator some 470 feet to the observation deck of Reunion Tower. Here, from the recently redesigned GeO-Deck, you can appreciate 360-degree views of the Dallas skyline, zoom in on landmarks via touch-screen computers, and learn more about the assassination of President Kennedy, an important if tragic chapter in the city's history. On a clear day, you can see as far as 32 miles.

For your third outing, decide whether you want to spend an afternoon immersed in U.S. history at the George

W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, where you can take a photo in a full-size replica of the Oval Office; or if you'd like to spend the afternoon frolicking in the sun at the picturesque Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden—always fun for the kids and a gold mine for family photos.

Your last attraction might be the Dallas Zoo, which beckons with 106 acres of wildlife, including zebras, elephants, giraffes, and hippos. Families with kids might also pack their swimsuits for a break in the zoo's wading stream. Alternatively, you can take a deeper look at President Kennedy's life and legacy at the Sixth Floor Museum.

As with all CityPASS offerings, you'll have nine days to use your tickets, which leaves ample time to explore areas such as Deep Ellum for live music and nightlife, or the Bishop Arts District for the quintessential Big D boutique shopping experience. ★

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A Key to Understanding

A VISIT TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR BRINGS HISTORY INTO FOCUS

text by Clayton Maxwell

I KNOW A MUSEUM HAS TRIUMPHED WHEN I leave a bit stunned, new realizations having just taken hold. Before my recent visit to the National Museum of the Pacific War and Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, I had considered the site a destination solely for World War II history buffs. And while I was surprised to find the artifacts of war so intriguing, that realization is not the one that left me teary-eyed in the penultimate exhibition room. I was startled by how, in weaving together the complex threads of history, the museum tells the story of a whole generation—and in that telling, there is a story of my family, too.

The awareness hits me right away, in the first exhibition room, when I read one of FDR's famous quotes, emblazoned large upon the wall, "To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is asked. This generation



THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR is at 340 E. Main St. in Fredericksburg. Call 830/997-8600; www.pacificwar-museum.org.

of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." It dawns on me that FDR was talking about my mother's mom and dad, Joy and Stanley Price, aka Nana and Papa, who played outlandish games with my sister and me in the attic and took us to the dollar store for shopping sprees. But now, standing at the beginning of this labyrinth of exhibition halls, taking in FDR's dignified pronouncement, I get a whole new perspective on something I had never fully comprehended: that my grandparents had been two young people swept up in a wave of history that changed the world. And it changed them, too.



My grandmother, at the age of 19, married a fighter pilot named Edward Raymond Woolery; they were stationed in the Philippines when she gave birth to my uncle. A few months before the Pearl Harbor attack, she and her son were sent home to San Antonio. She didn't find out that her husband had died in combat until months later, when an Air Force officer knocked on the door with the news. A wartime widow with a small child, she then met and fell in love with my grandfather,

In weaving together the complex threads of history, the museum tells the story of a whole generation.

also an Air Force pilot, who was stationed in San Antonio at that time as a flight instructor. They married and had a daughter, my mom. But he too was called away to the Pacific War, and began flying B-29s off of the island of Tinian in the Marianas. My grandmother said goodbye yet again to her husband, not knowing if he would return.

I move from room to room of the museum and take in all of the video, audio, photographs, maps, and artifacts that the museum uses to explain the war and the global forces that caused it: the U.S. isolationism that followed the Great Depression, the introduction of Commodore Perry in the mid-1800s, and the ensuing Sino-Japanese War. One thing leads to another, of course, and the museum teaches how these seemingly disparate events of history are interwoven.

I stand in the Pearl Harbor room and listen to a recording of FDR announcing war on Japan, imagining my grandparents hearing his voice over the radio 75 years ago. I watch computerized maps showing how U.S. planes steadily took over the islands that they needed in the Pacific to gain access to Japan, thinking about my grandfather making the 12-hour round-

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trip flight between Tinian and Japan.

But it is in the Victory Room where I understand at a gut level how this museum presents a personal story, too. Because it is in the video of the momentous September 2, 1945, surrender ceremony aboard the USS *Missouri* that I get to see my grandfather flying in a tiny black plane over the Bay of Tokyo. I can't

really see him *specifically*, of course—but I know that he was in one of the B-29s flying in a massive air formation, floating like flocks of geese over the ship where General MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz, the Japanese foreign minister, and many Allied heads of state were signing the peace document that would end the war.

In watching that video screen, I feel a hint of what that ceremony represented to so many people—the promise of peace. And for us, it meant that my mother and my uncle were going to grow up with a father, and that my grandmother would not be widowed again.

I stand in the Pearl Harbor room and listen to a recording of FDR announcing war on Japan, imagining my grandparents hearing his voice over the radio 75 years ago.

Afterwards, into the sunshine of a perfect blue-sky day, I sit overlooking the Peace Garden. This Japanese garden, with its waves of raked white rocks representing the Pacific Ocean, was built by Japanese gardeners and carpenters in 1976 to honor the respect between U.S. Admiral Nimitz and Japan's Admiral Togo, as well as the work Nimitz did after the war to repair relations between the two countries. A plaque reads that this garden "is a gift to the people of the United States from the people of Japan with prayers for everlasting world peace through the goodwill of our two nations."

While I imagine this unlikely respect between two admirals from opposing sides of the war, I hold in my hands a leather key chain I'd just bought in the gift shop. Fastened to the leather is a silver replica of the Air Force Seal—an eagle clutching a shield flashing with lightening bolts. Sometimes we need an everyday object to remind us of the bigger picture, of the victories and losses that have shaped our world. This keychain is a reminder of what the museum helped me grasp in a more meaningful way—that while Joy and Stanley Price will always be two lovable grandparents, they are also, as FDR put it, part of a generation of whom much was asked, when even surviving to become a grandparent meant that you were one of the lucky ones. ★



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Happy Trails

TAKE AN EASY AMBLE THROUGH THE FRIO CANYON

text by Paula Dishbrowe

THE SCENE IS WISTFULLY FAMILIAR. As I pull off US 83 and into the stables at Elm Creek Ranch near Concan, there are a dozen or so horses saddled and tethered to the open-air barn where round bales of hay are stacked to the ceiling. A mess of chickens scratch around the yard, an old dog snoozes in the shade, and a frisky chestnut foal prances around the ring. Clayton Kessler, a strapping 27-year-old roper, is attempting to shoe an impatient cream-colored horse. His grandfather, George Streib, a veteran rancher who originated the trail rides and other offerings here, sits at a nearby picnic table, offering



ELM CREEK STABLES
is in Concan, 1/4-mile north of Garner State Park, at 31611 US 83 North. Reservations are recommended. Call 830/232-5365 or 817/781-5079.

unsolicited advice. The horse paws at the dirt, irritated. George looks at me and winks; I smile in return, feeling the deep swell of happiness that comes from seeing an old friend.

"I thought I'd be slowing down by now," George tells me, removing his gray Resitol and wiping the sweat from his broad, sun-freckled forehead, "but I haven't. I'm busier than ever." It's nice to know things haven't changed. I met George 14 years ago when my husband and I left New York City to cook

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at a guest ranch a few miles down the road. For four years, we swapped stories over coffee in the morning and cold longnecks on most evenings. Dragging a trail of caliche dust, his pick-up and red horse trailer became as predictable as the goats escaping the pasture and feasting on the front lawn.

George taught us how to identify agave and wild persimmon, how to harvest prickly pear, and to never, ever, walk between a momma feral hog and her babies. George served as a trail guide for our guests, and the memory of him sitting sideways in the saddle, smoking a cigarette and charming guests with tall tales, makes me smile even today.

We'd lucked into the perfect mentor for our new life in Texas. George was born and raised in the Frio Canyon, and his roots go way back. His grandfather

left Germany when he was 21 and eventually landed a position running sheep at a ranch in Kerrville, where he married and had children. The family moved to the land that's now Garner State Park when George's father was young. George tells me that going to dances in the park pavilion each summer beneath a sky full of stars were some of the "happiest times in my life."

Over the years, George would leave the area and return several times before settling down for good. He opened Elm Creek Stables 18 years ago. "I've been to a lot of places, and none of them are prettier than this," he says, motioning to the soft slope of hills that shapes the horizon.

In addition to his horses, there are plenty of other hungry mouths to feed. With a gentle nature that can soothe a frightened fawn, George's wife, Beverly,

has taken in an endless stream of abandoned animals, including baby goats, a blind deer, a miniature horse, a Shetland pony, a pot-bellied pig, and a peahen. The spoiled menagerie has become a petting zoo for visitors, who often hang out here before and after their horseback rides into the hills.

"We have people who came as kids who are returning with their kids," George tells me. There are two trails for riders to choose from. The lower "family trail" has gentle inclines that can accommodate "doubles" (a parent and child age two to five); this ride lasts about an hour and meanders past mountain laurel, cedar, Spanish oak, and live oaks. The "high trail" offers spectacular views of the Frio River canyon and is so inspiring that some visitors have proposed marriage up there. "Riders have climbed off their horses, gone down on one knee, and pulled out a diamond and a bottle of wine," says Beverly.



Guests begin an easy ride.

Although the cowboy setting is legit, the experience in the saddle is an easy amble; riders stay on the trail in single file, mostly for the safety of other riders. "Most of our riders are inexperienced,"

Beverly says, "So our horses have been trained to stay on the trail. If one started to gallop, the others might follow."

At the end of the trail, there's a gift shop selling stuffed animals, plaques

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TEXAS WILD

with cowboy slogans, and gifts made by local craftsmen, including such necessities as whiskey bottles repurposed as night lights.

In addition to creating memories for families that descend upon the Frio each summer, the Streibs are also doing their part to preserve what makes the area special. Like most horse operations across the state, Elm Creek endured drought over the last several years. While the Streibs were able to sustain their horses on supplemental feed, other owners resorted to releasing their animals to survive on their own. Beverly created the Frio Canyon Horse Rescue in 2014, and soon they started taking in neglected or abused horses and rehabilitating them for future adoption. Currently the program supports 30 horses and offers visitors several ways to interact with them: Not only can you groom some of the tamer animals, but you can also sponsor a specific horse and receive a picture and updates about its progress.

"I've been to a lot of places, and none of them are prettier than this," he says, motioning to the soft slope of hills.

They're also working to honor their family's history. When the Rio Frio church was put up for sale last year, George, his brother Willis, and a group of local investors purchased it and turned it into a community center for local events. "Our grandparents helped build the church in 1915, and my parents were married there," Willis says. "We didn't want it bulldozed and turned into a vacation home."

George says that the biggest change in the area has been the shift from ranching to tourism. "Very few people are running sheep and goats these days," he says. Luckily for visitors who crave a connection to the area's history, it's still possible to stop at Elm Creek Stables and ride a horse through the natural landscape. That's a simple pleasure that changes little with the times. ★

DETOUR

A Meteoric Blast

THE ODESSA METEOR CRATER MUSEUM EXPLORES A 63,000-YEAR-OLD CRATER

text by **Cathryn A. Hoyt**

A

METEOR STREAKS ACROSS THE pre-dawn sky, its long tail sparkling. Perhaps Chicken Little is right. The sky is falling. But what are the chances that a killer meteorite might land in West Texas? The chances are low, but it has happened before.

To learn more about that catastrophic occasion some 63,000 years ago, I head for the second-largest meteor crater in the United States. About 10 miles west of Odessa, I exit off Interstate 20 and follow Meteor Crater Road as it threads between tumbleweed-choked fence lines and pump jacks en route to

The Odessa meteor crater site has attracted attention at least since the 1890s, when a rancher found a strange fist-sized rock in his pasture.

the Odessa Meteor Crater Museum.

Perched on the edge of the 550-foot diameter crater, the museum tells the story of its namesake crater and offers fascinating exhibits about meteorites from around the world. Posters line a wall of the one-room museum, showing where meteors come from, where they've struck the earth, and the dramatic consequences. A small gift shop—including necklaces with meteorite fragments—occupies one corner of the room, while a flat-screen monitor showing educational videos occupies the other.

The Odessa meteor crater site has attracted attention at least since the 1890s, when a rancher found a strange fist-sized rock in his pasture. Thinking it was a sample of iron ore, he gave the rock to a geologist from Baltimore who sent it to the Smithsonian Institution for testing. The piece was 91 percent iron and



DIG THIS
A 1953 search for meteorites at the Odessa Meteor Crater.

PHOTO: Courtesy Odessa Meteor Crater Museum

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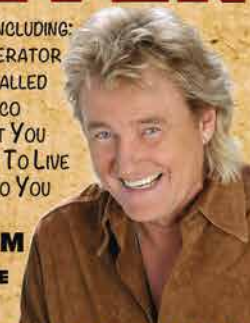
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The museum tells the story of its namesake crater and offers fascinating exhibits about meteorites from around the world, including this 70-pound iron octahedrite from Odessa.

contained the classic black fusion crust and crystalline structure of a meteorite.

At first, no one gave much thought to “the great depression” where the meteorite was found, despite the upturned limestone blocks lining the rim of the eight-foot-deep hole. Standing on the lip of the crater, I marvel at the force that was necessary to dislodge these blocks, some of them as large as desks, from 22 feet below the surface to where they stand now.

It happened, scientists believe, when a superheated lump of iron and nickel crashed through the atmosphere and shattered into a swarm of meteors. Moving at up to 27,000 miles per hour, the meteors compressed and warmed the air as they fell from the sky. One chunk, perhaps as large as 32 feet in diameter, never made it to earth. Just before impact, the chunk exploded, throwing a shower of small meteorites in a two-mile radius and creating the Odessa meteor crater. (The blast actually created five craters, which are collectively known as the Odessa Meteor Crater.) Shock waves threw dirt and rock high into the air, peeled limestone back, and fractured deeper layers of sandstone into rock flour. The blast sparked fires, created a rush of 1,500-mph winds, and instantly killed any plants or animals within 2,000 feet.

Inside the museum, a glass case displays the type of nickel-iron meteorites

found at the Odessa crater, as well as stony meteorites found elsewhere in the world. Douglas “Turtle” Neatherlin, the museum’s manager, explains the difference. “It’s the amount of metal they contain,” he says. “The nickel-iron meteorites are usually 90 to 95 percent iron. The stony meteorites are only about 5 percent iron. We think the nickel-iron meteorites came from the core of a planet or asteroid that disintegrated, while the stony meteorites come from the crust.” Some of the museum’s dense nickel-iron meteorites are cut and polished to show their beautiful crystalline structure.

Interest in the Odessa meteor crater accelerated in 1926, when geologist D.M. Barringer Jr. read a paper describing the meteorite and the curious hole near Odessa. The son of a Philadelphia mining engineer who identified a huge meteor crater in Arizona, Barringer was intrigued. Could this be another meteor crater? Barringer



THE ODESSA METEOR CRATER MUSEUM

is at 5599 Meteor Crater Rd, about 10 miles west of Odessa. The museum opens Tue-Sat 10-5. Free admission, donations accepted. Call 432/381-0946; www.odessameteorcrater.com.

visited the site and immediately recognized the upturned rocks encircling the depression, the iron shale, and the material blown out of the crater and scattered across the surface—all features indicating that the hole was special. He was sure it was a meteor crater.

It wasn’t until 1939, however, that geologists from the University of Texas arrived with a crew of Works Progress Administration men to excavate the crater. They believed that the meteorite was buried deep below ground. They set out to dig a shaft down to the main body of the meteorite, then dig a lateral tunnel to provide a view of the meteorite in its subterranean resting place.

The WPA workers dug a 165-foot-deep shaft into the center of the crater, turning up tiny fragments of meteorites along the way but ultimately discovering that there was no big meteorite. The impenetrable layer that geologists thought was the main meteorite turned out to be a

dense layer of bedrock. In 1941, the project ended abruptly as the WPA workforce was called to fight in World War II.

Located on land owned by the Texas & Pacific Railroad, the shaft lay abandoned, a place for local teenagers to explore. “When I was in high school, we’d go out there at night with a mesquite stick and light it and climb down,” says Tom Rodman, who grew up on a neighboring ranch and is now an attorney in Odessa.

Rodman’s boyhood adventures sparked a lasting interest in meteors and prompted him to lead efforts to preserve the site, raising funds to build a small museum on the property. “A lot of people said, ‘We’ve got this crater, we ought to do something with it,’” Rodman recalls. Rodman also donated a collection of meteorites and put together exhibits for the museum. The museum opened in 1965, the same year the National Park Service designated the crater site a National Natural Landmark.

The railroad donated the crater land to Ector County in 1979.

The remote museum proved to be a target for vandalism and thieves, but Rodman didn’t give up. He eventually convinced the late state Representative Buddy West of Odessa to provide state funding to build the current museum, which opened in 2002 and attracts thousands of visitors each year.

I follow the quarter-mile-long asphalt trail down into the crater, pausing to read the interpretive signs. Over thousands of years, sand and dirt have filled the crater to within about eight feet of the surrounding ground. Mesquite, thin patches of grass, and yucca plants cover the crater floor.

As I head back up the trail, I stop to visit with a family making its way to the crater. The children bubble with excitement. Why, I ask, are they interested in this place? “Because,” the little girl says, “It’s from outer space.” ★



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Paddle Port O

A MATAGORDA ISLAND KAYAKING ADVENTURE

text by ANDREA ABEL



Matagorda Island Wildlife Management Area

I'M AN OCCASIONAL WEEKEND PADDLER, launching a canoe or kayak about once a month with my trusty paddling partner and husband John. We'll go for an hour or so together on Austin's Lady Bird Lake or the Lower Colorado River. Those gentle paddles are a cakewalk for my über-athletic sweetie, who has conquered multi-day saltwater expeditions and marathon day trips covering 30 miles. I'm not anywhere near that type of athlete. But, I got tired of experiencing his adventures via photos and exhilarating tales.

That's how we found ourselves recently at The Fishing Center in Port O'Connor, packing up our beat-up, blue tandem kayak for a two-night camping trip to Matagorda Island. One of five narrow barrier islands along the Texas coast, the 38-mile island is protected as the Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge and State Natural Area.

Equipped with maps, tide charts, and pre-loaded GPS points—essential tools for a trip like this—we slid into the water late on a Friday afternoon and set off on the 40-mile Port O'Connor Paddling Trail. We quickly shifted into a coordinated paddling rhythm, racing against daylight to make it seven miles to Sunday Beach, our destination for the first night.



PORT O'CONNOR PADDLING TRAIL

consists of six trails that together run about 40 miles through Matagorda Bay and Espiritu Santo Bay. For information, including maps and access points, see www.tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/coastal/port_oconnor.



The 1852 lighthouse

Our first challenge was a quick dash across the choppy waters of the Intra-coastal Waterway, which provides a navigable coastline route for barges and boats. Once in calmer water, we paddled through bayous of tangled mangroves and around Michelle's Cut using GPS to follow sign posts on the paddling trail, staying close to shore to avoid the anglers passing by in motorboats.

As if peering into a magical fairy tale, we spied a secluded cove where roseate spoonbills and white ibis pranced through the shallow water on long

skinny legs searching for a last-minute meal before dark. A few of the birds took flight, their broad wings catching golden rays of sunlight to create a breathtaking flash.

We quickly shifted into a coordinated paddling rhythm, racing against daylight to make it seven miles to Sunday Beach, our destination for the first night.

The sun slid below the horizon as we paddled onto Sunday Beach from the bay side. The entire beach and cove were ours alone for the night. Headlamps on, I prepped dinner while John pitched the tent, careful to avoid crab holes, a tip he'd picked up on a previous trip. "One time, I woke up in the middle of the night to an eerie sound of something hitting the outside of the tent," he recalled. "I later realized that I'd pitched the tent near a crab hole, and the angry crab was throwing sand onto the side of the tent."

The north end of Matagorda Island, including Sunday Beach, has no water, toilet facilities, trash cans, or picnic tables. Campers must bring all food and water and pack out their trash.

After dark, the night sky sparkled with constellations and shooting stars. A gentle breeze kept the bugs at bay. I quickly fell into deep sleep with the dim roar of waves hitting the nearby Gulf side of the island, grateful for the soft sand beneath my sleeping pad.

Saturday morning, we walked about a quarter of a mile on a path cut through the dunes to the Gulf of Mexico beach. Shells glimmered on the sand as far as we could see, not another human in sight. Undulating lines of brown pelicans skimmed the water's surf, looking for their next meal.

We packed up our gear and headed across the bay to a deep inlet called the Fish Pond, a fishing spot recommended by Donnie Klesel at Port O'Connor Rod & Gun. I was dreaming of landing a big redfish for dinner, [continued on page 17 >>

MAYA

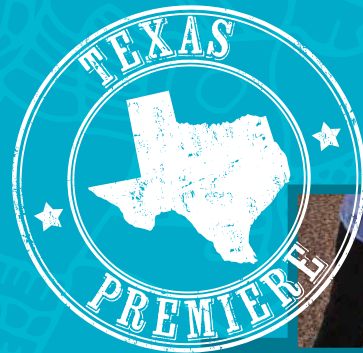
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« continued from page 15] but I had to be content with a few nibbles on my line. In the narrow inlets, silvery fish jumped all around us, tormenting me. One fish even jumped up and hit John smack-dab on his torso, eliciting a loud exclamation and then a chuckle.

For the next few hours and six miles, we paddled peacefully among the mangrove tangles, accompanied by shy water birds like an American oystercatcher with its long red beak. Occasionally, we encountered muddy shallows that forced us to get out and pull the boat—an unexpected challenge that was inconsistent with the tide forecast. (A local scientist later told us that the shallow conditions were possibly a result of high northern winds.)

Bottlenose dolphins followed alongside the kayak as we neared our campground for the second night, a developed section of the island that was formerly an Army base and state park



MATAGORDA ISLAND

For information about Matagorda Island activities and rules, call 361/205-1510; www.tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/wma/find_a_wma/list/?id=48.

campground. Closed buildings and crumbling infrastructure gave the area a slightly post-apocalyptic feel. But the covered picnic tables were handy, even if the bathrooms and showers were closed this time of year, and we angled our tent away from the concrete and rusting metal toward a magnificent western view of the island and a small bay.

Somehow John convinced me to take the seven-mile, round-trip hike across the island's flat, scrubby grassland to see the 1852 cast-iron lighthouse that once served as a beacon providing safe

passage to the port of Indianola through Pass Cavallo, which links the Gulf of Mexico and Matagorda Bay. We marveled at the behemoth of a structure, imagining the lonely lives of past lighthouse caretakers.

The next morning was sunny and calm as we loaded up the boat to head back to Port O'Connor. We decided on a direct 2.7-mile, open-water crossing to avoid the previous day's shallows. The weather quickly turned into rolling gray clouds and a steady wind.

As waves slapped against the boat's bow, I thought of French explorer La Salle and his ship *La Belle*, which sank nearby more than 300 years ago. I was grateful when we reached calmer waters protected by mangroves and marshes. At midday, we landed at Port O'Connor after paddling 23 miles in two days. I was now the owner of my own paddling adventure experience. Mission accomplished! ★



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Finding Your *Thrill*

PICK-YOUR-OWN BERRIES AT BLUEBERRY HILL IN EDMOM

text by Clayton Maxwell illustration by Kelly Colchin

I SAT CROSS-LEGGED IN THE SANDY DIRT at the foot of a blueberry bush at a pick-your-own farm called Blueberry Hill Farms in Edom. It was a hot mid-afternoon in June—prime picking time in Texas—but a breeze blew through the long, green rows of bushes. The berry clumps were plentiful down there, and they fell into my bucket by the dozens. Around me, I heard lively exhortations from my children and other families: things like “Don’t eat, Bobby—pick!” and “Whoaaa, look at this one! It’s the fattest blueberry ever!” But I was undistracted. Plop, plop, plop—a state of focused attention, just me and the bush, one purple handful of berries at a time.

If you really want to fill your bucket, blueberry-picking requires a shift in perspective. When you get down low, on your knees or even sitting down, that’s often when you find



BLUEBERRY HILL FARMS is in Edom, 72 miles east of Dallas. Blueberry season generally runs June 1-July 31, but sometimes starts late May. Seasonal hours: 7 a.m.-5 p.m. Call 903/852-6175; www.blueberryhillfarms.com.

the big blue clumps that you can pick by the handful. To me, that’s more rewarding than the painstaking one-berry-at-a-time method that works if you stand around at eye-level.

From the second I walked past the red barn of the Blueberry Hill Farms Country Store with my bucket in hand, I knew my family and I were going to like it here. Perhaps it was the friendly East Texas drawl of the guy working the concession stand on the side porch. “We’ve got sausages and we’ve got blueberry ice cream, but we sold out of the blueberry donuts,” he yelled out to a co-worker as he sweated behind the donut

machine. “Biggest day of the season! Tomorrow we may have nothing left!” I better get picking, I thought.

I didn’t know then that this friendly fellow behind the fryer was Chuck Arena, who owns the farm with his wife, Sherri, and their three daughters, who are now students at the University of Texas. Nor did I need to worry about a depleted berry supply. Chuck was talking about the packages of pre-picked berries; there was still a gorgeous blue bounty of berries out on the bushes for those of us who like to pick our own. And the donuts may have been gone, but there was still the farm’s famous blueberries-and-cream pie, blueberry ice cream, and about 20 varieties of jams to choose from. My kids and I would in no way be deprived of a sugar buzz.

We got to picking, which, with a nine- and five-year-old, is a mix of high-spir-

After a full Saturday of running the store, making donuts, and tending to visitors, Chuck is still happy to sit at a picnic table and talk berries.

ited competition (“How full is YOUR bucket?”) and relaxed concentration, as they eventually slipped into their own rhythm of focused picking and eating. (Chuck doesn’t seem to mind if you eat a few berries before your buckets have been weighed and paid for.) And we had picked for a full hour before the charm had worn off for the kids and they took to running through the rows of bushes—we only saw the signs asking them NOT to do that afterwards. Then, after we had finished, with our

berries paid for and bagged, I had the profound satisfaction of gobbling delicious, fat berries while the kids licked their quickly melting blueberry ice cream. If there’s one thing in this world you can gorge on and not feel too guilty about, it’s blueberries.

We are not the only ones who think that picking our own berries is a fun thing to do as a family. In fact, Chuck and Sherri Arena’s own sweet memories of family trips to pick-your-own farms in Mexia planted the seed for them to buy this berry farm. The Arenas had owned a telecommunications company in Richardson for decades, but they’d dreamed of having their own farm. In 1999, Sherri saw an ad in a Dallas newspaper advertising the sale of an established blueberry farm just outside of Edom. The couple headed out to tour the property and made a deposit on it that night, even

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Palo Duro Canyon State Park

though they'd only seen it in the dark. "We'd read a book on pick-your-own farms, but that was it," Chuck says. "The day we closed on this place, the former owner asked me if I knew how to drive a tractor, and I said no, and she just barrel-laughed. And I thought, 'Well, if I can do telephones, I can drive a tractor.'"

The little farm that is home to the store, concessions, and pick-your-own bushes covers about 10 acres, and there are another 46 acres nearby where professional pickers work. Chuck has a team of employees whom he calls "super pickers"; they fill whole buckets in minutes. The professional pickers arrive early and pick for hours so

there are plenty of berries for sale. Blueberry Hill Farms opens at 7 a.m. daily during picking season, and Arena says that early mornings are by far the best time to pick. "It's beautiful here in the morning; spider webs are strung across the fields from bush to bush. Those spiders do it every night. I don't know how they do it."

From the second I walked past the red barn of the Blueberry Hill Farms Country Store with my bucket in hand, I knew my family and I were going to like it here.

After more than 16 years, the luster of running their own blueberry farm has not worn off for Chuck and Sherri. Every year is different, they say, and there are always new challenges and more to learn. Each year, they attend a berry conference in Michigan, and they experiment with different varieties and now grow blackberries, too. They have learned to pay close attention to the land and the weather.

"A farmer lives by the weather," says Chuck. "In 2014, we had three days when the temperature dropped down to 18 degrees—first time in 15 years. We lost 90 percent of our blueberry blooms. But the blackberries, which bloom later than blueberries, saved the day for us. Every year is different. And I like it more now than ever."

Indeed, it does seem that Chuck has found his thrill. After a full Saturday of running the store, making donuts, and tending to the many visitors during this June rush, Chuck was still happy to sit at a picnic table and talk berries. When we finally parted ways, my family and I savored our lingering sugar buzz and happily imagined how we would turn our big bags of berries into multiple blueberry pies. ★

It's a Blast!

SPACE CENTER HOUSTON'S INDEPENDENCE PLAZA

text by Heather Brand

AS VISITORS APPROACH SPACE Center Houston, the space-themed museum located adjacent to NASA Johnson Space Center, a massive new exhibit looms into view—a replica of a full-size space shuttle mounted atop the original shuttle carrier aircraft. Together, the shuttle and airplane reach a height of nearly 80 feet and span 232 feet in length. This new attraction, called Independence Plaza, is the only one of its kind. While real shuttles can be seen elsewhere, none are attached to an actual shuttle carrier aircraft, and you're only able to see them from the outside. At Independence Plaza, you can explore the interiors of both vehicles, gaining an up-close perspective offered nowhere else on earth.

Video monitors throughout the shuttle carrier feature original NASA footage, TV reports of shuttle launches, and interviews with astronauts.

This triumph started as a disappointment. When the Space Shuttle Program came to an end in 2011, 29 sites across the United States vied for the retired orbiters. As home to NASA's Johnson Space Center, the Bayou City seemed like an obvious fit, but Houston lost out to Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Cape Canaveral, and New York City. As a consolation, the Kennedy Space Center offered Houston its 20-year-old replica shuttle, *Explorer*.

To Paul Spana, exhibits manager at Space Center Houston, the replica at first seemed like a booby prize, but he soon realized that it came with some advantages. Whereas the interiors of

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Independence Plaza, Space Center Houston

PHOTO: Will van Overbeek

DETOUR



INSIDE THE RIDE
At Space Center Houston, you can engage with exhibits inside the historic 747 used to transport orbiters back to base.



flown orbiters are inaccessible to the public in order to preserve them, the replica could be fitted with exhibits to showcase the history of the Space Shuttle Program. “I never thought I’d say it was a good thing we didn’t get a flown shuttle,” says Spana, “but it opened doors we didn’t know existed.” The center also held a contest to re-name the orbiter, and *Independence* was the winning submission. “It’s a good Texas name,” Spana affirms.

To accommodate the carrier and orbiter, Space Center Houston created a 1.7-acre outdoor plaza and an eight-story structure to house the necessary elevators and stairwell to access the vehicles. Visitors pass by the huge engines of the 747 before taking an elevator up to go inside. This aircraft, called

NASA 905, was the first of only two used in the Space Shuttle Program, and served on about three-fourths of the missions. In its former life, the carrier was an American Airlines passenger plane from 1970 to 1974. Although a few of the original first-class seats remain, the rest of the interior was gutted to reduce the weight for missions, and Spana has subsequently filled it with exhibits.

Inside, visitors encounter artifacts such as a 747 “black box” and pig-iron blocks used as ballast. These artifacts are scattered among displays that explain Johnson Space Center’s crucial role in the Space Shuttle Program. Here, in the 1960s, scientists conceived the idea of a reusable space vehicle. However, returning the shuttle from one of its landing sites, such as Edwards Air Force Base in California, to its launch pad in Florida proved to be a major challenge. NASA engineers Owen Morris and John Kiker championed the idea of using a plane to transport the shuttle back, and their 1/40-scale model of an orbiter atop a carrier is on display. A nearby video loops grainy footage of

some of their experiments with radio-controlled models at Ellington Air Force Base (now Ellington Airport).

Several other video monitors throughout the shuttle carrier feature original NASA footage, TV reports of shuttle launches, and interviews with astronauts discussing their experiences in the orbiter. In the middle of the fuselage, interactive exhibits address engineering issues; stress test and wind tunnel simulators allow visitors to activate buttons to maneuver orbiter models to overcome these challenges. A Mate-Demate simulator requires up to three people to coordinate efforts to move a model shuttle carrier aircraft into position, then align and lower an orbiter onto its back using a crane. Toward the rear of the plane, three kiosks with touch-screen monitors give visitors a behind-the-scenes look at activities taking place at the adjacent Johnson Space Center (such as testing a rover on rocky terrain made to resemble the surface of Mars), a look into the various jobs at NASA (including lesser-known yet relevant careers such as nutritionist), and which jobs may suit

them best. (I was happy to learn, after answering a brief series of questions, that I would make an excellent flight director.)

After exiting the plane and taking an elevator up to the next level, visitors can venture inside the orbiter replica to check out the flight deck and peer through a Plexiglas barrier at the control panel, with its multitude of switches. Stairs lead down to the mid-deck, where a video shows astronauts floating in zero gravity, with spoons and wrenches drifting weightless about the room. These cramped quarters house a “kitchen” (a bank of cabinets), a not-so-discreet toilet, and small lockers for equipment and the astronauts’ personal effects. A bright orange spacesuit and a sleeping bag (attached by Velcro to the wall) hang nearby.

Beyond the mid-deck, the payload bay has been retrofitted with a catwalk flanked by a wall-mounted timeline of the Space Shuttle Program, which ran from 1981 to 2011 and entailed 135 missions. One of those missions involved moving a satellite into a higher orbit. The metal cradle used to transport a rocket motor to boost that satellite can be seen at the back of the payload bay, accompanied by a video of the astronauts hard at work during the task.

Overall, Independence Plaza successfully conveys the magnitude of what NASA accomplished during the Space Shuttle Program, and no other shuttle display matches its scale. At the opening ceremony, on January 23, 2016, Fred Griffin, chairman of the Manned Space Flight Education Foundation, praised the outsized ambition of the new attraction: “You know the saying ‘Everything is bigger in Texas?’ Well, you know what? It is.” ★



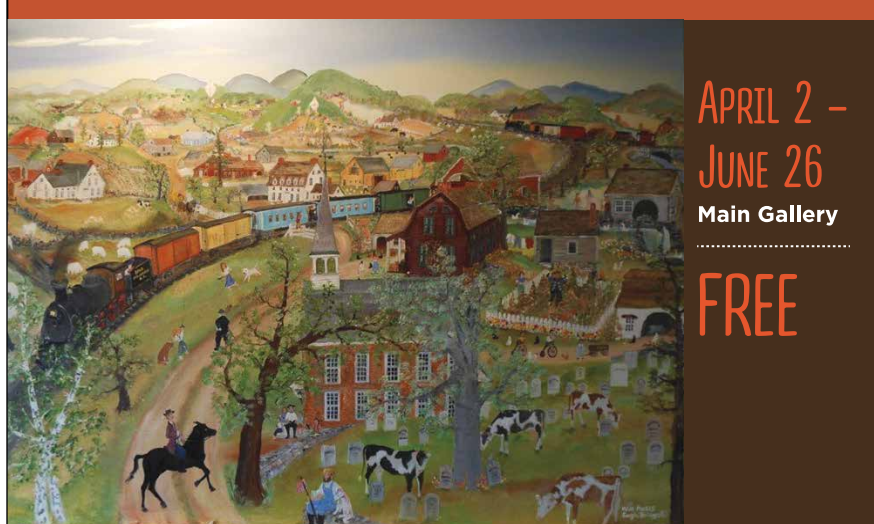
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Day With the Dolphins

NATURE TOURS BY BOAT EXPLORE PORT ARANSAS' BEAUTY

text by **Melissa Gaskill**

A SLEEK, GRAY BOTTLENOSE dolphin briefly breaks the surface of the water in a smooth, rolling motion. From my perch aboard the *Mustang*, a 65-foot trimaran, I catch just a glimpse, but before long, the dolphin emerges once again, this time with a second leaping next to it. Captain Tim Sonbert slows to an idle, and as the boat drifts, more dolphins appear. Parents and kids point and squeal with delight, and cameras click away while the dolphins play.

Our Dolphin Watch Nature Tour departed from Woody's



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Sports Center in Port Aransas beneath a sunny sky, accompanied by the sound of wind through the surrounding palms and Jimmy Buffett songs on the sound system.

Owner Billy Gaskins brings a long history to his operation. "I had my first job as a kid at Woody's," he says. "Woody himself is long gone, but he gave any kid the chance to earn some money working on his docks." In the late 1970s, Gaskins left Port Aransas to attend college in San Marcos, but he eventually

returned to his coastal roots on Mustang Island. "In 1985, my dad and I bought one of the old nine-car ferry boats, made a bay fishing boat out of it, and operated off the docks at Woody's."

A few years later, Gaskins bought another boat, and he started offering dolphin-watching tours in 1992. Since the beginning, he says, he aimed to show people on his tours not only the dolphins, but also examples of the accompanying marine life. "These days, I use a shrimp trawl, and we pull in seaweed and lots of critters, which we return to the ocean after showing them to passengers," he says. "If you shake the sargassum, all kinds of things fall out of it—crabs, shrimp, many kinds of fish. That kind of became our trademark." When he had the *Mustang* custom-built in 2003, Gaskins included an open, waist-high "touch tank" the size of a banquet table on the covered lower deck to give his passengers a closer look.

Sonbert announces that youngsters can help steer the boat, and a long line of eager would-be captains forms behind the wheelhouse.

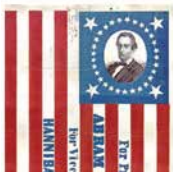
On today's outing, we first explore the channel between Port Aransas and St. Jo Island, heading toward the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, Sonbert points out landmarks such as the Lydia Ann Lighthouse and a sunken World War II ship called the S.S. *John Worthington*. He makes sure we notice the seabirds flying overhead or bobbing on the water, along with ships heading toward the port of Corpus Christi—some with dolphins surfing their bow waves. He then turns around and into the Lydia Ann Channel, a passage between St. Jo and the Lighthouse Lakes, a complex

chain of mangrove estuaries, sloughs, and open flats or lakes in Redfish Bay. Some of the 400 or so dolphins that call this part of the coast home often hang out in the channel.


We chug past the Lydia Ann Lighthouse, the channel's namesake. Built in the 1850s and named for the first keeper's daughter, the lighthouse once helped guide ships into the pass between St. Jo and Mustang islands. These barrier islands and natural passes constantly move, however, in response to storms and waves. The pass by the lighthouse had traveled a few miles south by 1907, when the Corps of Engineers fixed it permanently in its current location with two long, granite jetties. The lighthouse shut down in the 1950s, but in 1973, grocery-store mogul Charles Butt purchased it and restored it. The lighthouse began beaming once again in 1988.


Sonbert announces that youngsters

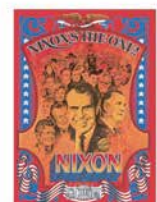
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can help steer the boat, and a long line of eager would-be captains forms behind the wheelhouse. Then, first mate T-Joe Miguez gets to work deploying the *Mustang's* shrimp trawl, and those same kids crowd around to watch. The net drags behind the boat for 10 minutes before Miguez winches it up and dumps its contents into a large tub. He carries that tub to the *Mustang's* touch tank and transfers the animals over one by one, identifying each as he goes—menhaden, pin perch, piggy perch, squid, shrimp, flounder, inshore lizardfish, a large male blue crab, and a female blue crab. The female crab carries a mass of eggs on her abdomen, and Miguez carefully returns her to the open water. As he lifts a striped burr fish out of the tub, it puffs up like a small, spiny balloon. Kids and adults alike jostle for a position to watch these creatures swim and scuttle about, tentatively touching whatever holds still long enough.

“We learned early on to do the net and tank at the end of the trip,” Gaskins

says. “Once we start, dolphins could be jumping through hoops around the boat, but the kids are so focused on that tank they wouldn’t notice.”

As many as 26 species of whales and dolphins appear on the Texas coast, with bottlenose dolphins by far the most common. They sport gray back-sides and pale underbellies, erect dorsal fins, and distinctive tails, and they form highly functioning social groups, called pods, of up to eight individuals. Pods live year-round in the same area, so Gaskins sees the same dolphins over and over.

“We’re out there all the time, and we recognize some of them by their markings and how they act,” he says. “Lydia Ann Channel is the center of their community; it gives them calm waters and access to all the fish that come in and out of the pass.”

The dolphins have everything they need here. Aboard the *Mustang*, dolphin-watchers have everything they need, too. ★

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Sealife Nature Center Tours, South Padre Island; www.spinaturecenter.com.

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Galveston Baywatch Tours, Galveston; www.galvestonbaywatch.com.

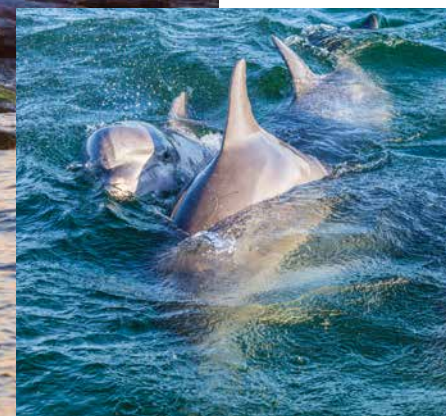
Dolphin Connection, Ingleside/Corpus Christi; www.dolphinconnectiontexas.com.

Dolphin Dock, Port Aransas; www.dolphindocks.com.



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Boyd Elder with one of his hand-painted cow skulls.

Keeper of the *Flame*

ARTIST BOYD ELDER, BEACON OF WEST TEXAS ART

text by Michael Corcoran

IN THE 1960S AT HIS SOHO BUILDING IN New York City, “minimalism” icon Donald Judd would take his phone off the hook and park his elevator on the second floor to avoid the agents, the media, and the young artists who saw him as a mentor. He wanted to work without distraction.

Judd found his splendid isolation in Marfa, the West Texas artist community that was just another small town when he moved there in 1971. Artist Boyd Elder, who had recently returned to his nearby hometown of Valentine, recalls receiving a phone call out of the blue from the famous New York artist, inviting him to dinner. The newcomer and the native would become friends for more than 20

Elder's painted animal skulls became famous as the cover art for best-selling albums by the Eagles.

years, until Judd passed away from lymphoma in 1994. Marfa was still in the middle of nowhere, but Judd made it the *middle* of nowhere.

“When I moved back to Texas [from Los Angeles] in 1968, everybody thought I was crazy. You had to live in New York or Los Angeles or nobody would know you’re alive,” says Elder, whose painted animal skulls became famous as the cover art for best-selling albums by the Eagles. “But then Donald Judd moved to Marfa and the art world came to me.”

Today, the chain-smoking, beer-drinking, hip-shooting Elder is an icon in the hip outpost, where seemingly everyone eats at Marfa Burrito and has a room scented by the locally made Marfa Brand soap. Private collectors, including singer Joni Mitchell, own many of Elder’s paintings and experimental

sculptures, but anyone can pop into the lobby of the *Big Bend Sentinel* and see his colorful abstract painting on the wall.

“Marfa! Marfa! Marfa!” That must be what the town of Valentine, about 34 miles west of Marfa, thinks, Jan Brady-like, of its trendy neighbor. Elder lives in Valentine, population 200, which was platted by his great-grandfather. The 73-year-old sleeps in his studio, a converted service station, and spends his days fixing up old cars and going on small adventures with his black lab Sombra de la Muerta.

Elder visits Marfa about three times a week to make the rounds, both social and practical, with Sombra riding along in the bed of his white pickup. During a recent outing, the dog ran around the manicured grounds of the new Capri restaurant as Elder popped in to see Virginia Lebermann, who co-owns the Capri and the fabulous Thunderbird Motel next door with her mother

Louise O’Connor. Lebermann also co-founded Ballroom Marfa, a non-profit gallery in a converted 1927 dancehall, with her business partner Fairfax Dorn. Ballroom Marfa helped build the famous Prada Marfa pop architectural art installation in Valentine, which was recently featured on *60 Minutes*. As site representative of Prada Marfa, which gets its humor from its desolate setting, Elder maintains the installation in its original condition. “Boyd found the location,” says Dorn. “He’s been involved since the beginning.” When vandals hit the faux storefront two days after its 2005 unveiling, Elder got the call at 4 a.m. and arrived moments after police.

While Marfa, which attracts more tourists from Europe and Japan than from El Paso, is a paradise for the art world, until recently, this had not been a town for foodies. More millionaires per capita have eaten at Subway in

Marfa than in any other town, it would seem. But the Capri, with its incensed-blessed plating room and “Pre-Columbian-Meso-American” cuisine, is one of the hot new eateries, along with the bar and restaurant at the new Hotel Saint George, which opened in March. “When John Waters was in town, he said, ‘There’s nothing but brown food here,’” Lebermann recalls. “We’re doing our part to add more colors.”

The mysterious Marfa Lights, about seven miles out of town, and the Hotel Paisano, where the cast of *Giant* stayed in 1955, are two of Marfa’s major visitor attractions. Tourists also make the trip for the permanent large-scale art installations at the Chinati Foundation, a former Army base that Judd bought and repurposed in 1986.

But Marfa has a walking landmark in Elder, whom his friend Dorn calls “the keeper of the flame.”

“Boyd connects new Marfa to old

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Marfa, not just because he was born and raised here, but he perpetuates the spirit, with his joy for life and love of art," Dorn says.

When Elder met Judd in 1972, he was on a career hot streak. Elder's one-man show in Venice, California, that year attracted a superstar crowd that included David Geffen, Jackson Browne, and Mama Cass Elliot. A band calling themselves the Eagles played their first public performance at the event.

Critics heralded Elder as a new visionary from the Southwest, with powerful paintings that were a strange hybrid of Native American motifs and car culture, sock hops and sacred burials. Elder made the pieces in his studio in Valentine, but on May 31, 1973, the studio burned to the ground. "It was just devastating," says Elder, who lost everything, including numerous finished works that had never been shown or photographed and a Maserati 3500 Superleggera.



Boyd Elder's artwork for the cover of the 1975 Eagles' album *One of These Nights*. See more at www.boydelder.com.

Without supplies, he started painting cow skulls. Several cows on a nearby ranch had died in a flash flood, providing Elder with a new medium, free of charge. "I painted the skulls like they were the gas tanks of motorcycles," says Elder, who pinstriped racing cars in his teenage years in El Paso.

The Chouinard Art Institute, now part of the California Institute of the Arts, drew Elder to Los Angeles, where a friend from El Paso, singer Bobby Fuller, financed his first studio at the corner of Sunset and Alvarado. The mysterious death of Fuller in July 1966 soured Elder on California, however, and he moved back to Texas for good two years later.

Today, the man that one critic called a "bad-ass Western artlaw" in the '70s is more figurehead than rising maverick, but Elder's not settling down one bit. "Right here and here," he says, chopping his arm to lay mental fences at the edges of the barren lot behind his humble studio in Valentine, "I'm going to build a wall." Walking across the field, he waves his hands over a length of land. "This will be another studio," he adds, "and over here is where I'm going to park my cars and motorcycles. I'm gonna build a compound, just like Donald Judd." ★



From Scraps to Souvenirs

TREASURE HUNTING AT NAUTICAL ANTIQUES & TROPICAL DECOR

text by Heather Brand

GALVESTON'S SHIPS MECHANIC Row got its name back in the 19th Century when it was an artery of the island's shipping industry, located just a few blocks from the wharf. The street—also referred to as Mechanic Avenue—bustled with seaport trade back then, and the busy atmosphere persists today with tourists trawling historic downtown Galveston's shops, museums, and restaurants.

Amid the hubbub is a not-so-hidden treasure trove, Nautical Antiques & Tropical Decor, located on the first floor of the landmark J. Reymershoffer's Sons commission house building. The enterprising Czech immigrant John Reymershoffer built the structure in 1876 for a glass and porcelain import business. Although the building originally had three stories, Hurricane Carla destroyed the top floor in 1961 and only the bottom two floors were salvaged.

Nautical Antiques' best-selling items are the glass floats that fishermen once used to buoy their fishing nets and long lines.

As it turns out, Nautical Antiques & Tropical Decor also stocks glass and porcelain, in the form of glass fishing net floats and ships' crockery, along with countless other items. Shipping paraphernalia festoons practically every inch of the 4,200-square-foot store. The walls are decked with vintage gear like bright orange life rings, brass bells, old rigging, pulley blocks and deadeyes, and red and green lanterns, used for indicating port and starboard, respectively.

Michael and Adrienne Culpepper, partners in marriage and merchandising, have owned and operated the shop since 2000, sometimes accompanied by their good-natured chocolate lab, Popeye. They first opened the shop



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GAUGE YOUR INTEREST
The Culpeppers scour shipbreaking yards around the world to collect vintage components.

in a building farther east, at the corner of 23rd and Winnie streets, but they relocated to higher ground after Hurricane Ike destroyed their inventory in 2008. The move to their present location turned out to be a boon, as it placed them in the midst of the island's prime shopping and tourism area.

To restock their inventory, the Culpeppers close the shop once a year to travel as far afield as India, Bangladesh, Turkey, and China to visit shipbreaking yards, where vessels are taken apart to be discarded or sold for scrap. Adrienne and Michael scour the yards for choice items to bring back to Galveston. As 20th-Century ships are retired, their equipment becomes less common, so the Culpeppers acquire as much as possible on each excursion, packing shipping containers with vintage objects that get harder to find every year. They store the surplus of antiques—from ships' wheels to hand-knotted rope bumpers, teak hatch covers, foghorns, and portholes—in an 8,000-square-foot warehouse separate from the shop.

Nautical Antiques' best-selling items

are the glass floats that fishermen once used to buoy their nets and long lines. These beautiful green and blue orbs, ranging from baseball- to basketball size, are wrapped in a mesh of knotted rope, and they grace nearly every surface of the store. Floats hang from the ceiling, cluster in the corners, and pack overhead storage nooks. Anglers used the glass floats from the 1800s into the 1960s, when plastic floats replaced them. So even though Nautical Antiques has plenty of the glass bulbs in stock, Adrienne notes, there is ultimately a limited supply. Part of their appeal is the affordable price—\$40 for the large floats and \$12 for smaller floats.

In addition to salvaged items, the Culpeppers also carry a few artisan-made goods, such as brightly painted fish made from recycled oil drums in Haiti and artful sea creatures pieced together from driftwood. The hand-carved sculptures from Indonesia inevitably draw attention: The colorful wooden float-lines are both eye-catching and inexpensive at \$25. The mermaid figureheads are also hard to resist.

Nautical Antiques' other popular items include decommissioned flags—hand-dyed flags, 100 percent wool flags, and others weathered from use. Several racks near the back of the store display the particolored flags of such faraway places as Belgium, Brazil, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates. Nearby, high shelves hold late 20th-Century navigational charts from around the world (priced at a mere \$10 each).

During my recent visit, the priciest item in the store was a 450-pound brass 1940s engineer order telegraph (commonly called an EOT) at \$6,000. Ship pilots used the device to communicate orders to engineers in the engine room to accelerate or slow the vessel. And the oldest item available was a petite, 18th-Century bronze signal cannon the length of a forearm. Ships used the miniature cannons to send warnings or salutes, rather than as weapons.

"Some people care about and ap-

preciate the backstory of a piece that has traversed the globe and then somehow found its way to our small island and into their hands," Adrienne says. "It's nice when people stop to actually think and consider how something came to be here—that it had a life of some kind, that it survived so many journeys."

A few of the shop's items continued their journeys to my home: I picked up a strand of rope strung with pieces of bone-white driftwood to hang from my kitchen ceiling and a yellow-and-black striped lifeboat oar as a wall ornament.

Among Adrienne's personal favor-



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ites are the navigational instruments, such as compasses and binnacles (the stand that houses the compass), which have been supplanted by GPS navigation. She's also fond of the dishes, cups, and saucers dating from the 1930s through the 1980s bearing the insignias of various shipping lines, such as Maersk-Sealand and Mediterranean Shipping Company. "Ships don't spend their money making it anymore," she says. "You just can't find it. Now they use unbreakable plastic."

Of course, Nautical Antiques has several sets of this hard-to-come-by crockery in a display case near the register, confirming that this is indeed the place to discover any number of obsolete and unusual pieces not to be found anywhere else on the island, or even in Texas. It's a bonanza of nautical wares, overflowing with rare gifts, beach-house decor, or anything else that floats your boat. ★



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