

Town squares with ornate courthouses looming over old brick storefronts. Football fields spot-lit in the dark, lined by aluminum bleachers holding half the town. A lone blinking yellow traffic signal in an intersection not quite busy enough for a stop sign or a red light.

Even those who've never lived in a small town will find these images familiar—the classic scenery of the simple life in Texas. Less familiar are the new images popping up in small towns across the state. That old house on Main Street with the huge front porch? It might be a new coffee shop with a stout cappuccino. The glass-windowed storefront with a view of the square? It could be a wine bar with an impressive selection of reds. While shoppers are accustomed to going to the nearest big city to search for a new dress, today they're likely to consider exiting the interstate to peruse a small-town boutique.

When redevelopment comes to cities, it's not unusual for residents to push back. The changes can feel too swift and too close to home. This is less often the case in our evolving small towns. Rather, the community bands together to support their own. Small municipal governments can be nimbler in helping to smooth the way.

Travis Kocurek, who opened Hound Song Brewing Co. in Columbus with his wife, Raven, in 2020, shares an appreciation for the blue-collar grit of the town where he's chosen to build a business. "They see the passion we bring to our work, and it is infectious," he says.

In smaller communities, people notice one another giving their all to make their new ventures succeed. Success is shared. Again and again, when you ask residents of small towns what they love most about them, you'll hear the word "community."

Sarah Koller, owner of The House coffee and wine bar in Columbus, explains it well: "I moved here by myself, and the community has helped me grow. I couldn't have done most of what I have without the town's support."

Here we explore five Texas small towns that are evolving while retaining a sense of community that's as solid as the courthouse on the square.

—STACEY SWANN



OPENING SPREAD: Coffee beans at Coffee Wizards in Post; a chocolate malt at the Corner Drug Cafe in Clifton. **ABOVE, CLOCKWISE:** Dawna and Jeff Hood, owners of Coffee Wizards; coffee beans; a cheeseburger at Holly's Drive Inn; a Holly family portrait; Hotel Garza.

Photos: Kenny Braun

Post

If you've ever traveled north to the Texas Panhandle on US 84, then you've driven through Post. "You have to go right through the middle of town," says Ruth Torrens, who co-owns Hotel Garza, a century-old hotel located two blocks from the highway, with her husband, Ian. "Traffic from 84 is a big part of the town staying alive—it's very busy."

Flanked by the Caprock Escarpment, Post was founded in 1907 by C.W. Post, of Post breakfast cereals fame. The inventor and developer bought about 200,000 acres to build a model community, anchored by a town with tree-lined streets and no alcohol, brothels, or other immoral activity. When it became apparent that West Texas didn't get enough precipitation for trees to flourish quickly, Post tried detonating explosives in the atmosphere to make it rain—an experiment loosely rooted in concussion theory of weather modification—to zero effect. Today, what Post lacks in trees, it makes up for in spirit.

Consider Hotel Garza, a 107-year-old hotel that's been thoughtfully renovated and harbors 11 rooms and suites as well as a library and a garden courtyard for relaxing in the West Texas atmosphere. "We're close to shops and things downtown," Torrens says. "Everything's just right here within walking distance."

Main Street offers an eclectic mix of antiques shops, a florist, and a nail salon. If you're in town in August, you can catch the Post Stampede Rodeo (Aug. 11-13 this year). Or, if you'd like to see a show, Ragtown Gospel Theater stages religiously themed productions. *Ragtown! A Musical Drama*, which depicts the founding of Post, is showing through Aug. 27.

Another essential stop is Coffee Wizards, a shop that roasts its own beans and serves tea and baked goods. "We get our oil field workers who come in and get their coffee before they go to work, along with teachers, our small businesses, and then travelers," co-owner Dawna Hood says. "It's the small-town feel, the camaraderie of being able to come in with your friends and sit down and have a good cup of coffee and be able to visit. The atmosphere is just cool."

—JENNIFER STEWART

	<p>STAY</p> <p>HOTEL GARZA STARTS AT \$129/NIGHT. HOTELGARZA.COM</p>	<p>EAT</p> <p>HOLLY'S DRIVE INN 615 S. BROADWAY ST. 806-495-2704</p>	<p>POPULATION</p> <p>4,790</p>
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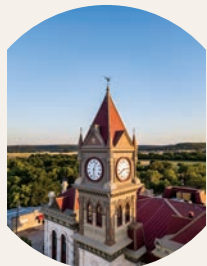
NAME THAT TOWN

Where are each of these courthouses located?

SEE ANSWERS ON PAGE 45

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Gladewater

It's fitting that Gladewater is home to a used bookstore so expansive that browsers can get lost in its maze of rooms. At Gladewater Books, readers will be tempted by an abundance of Texas history books, an array of reads acquired from auctions of author Larry McMurtry's collection, and everything else a bibliophile could dream of. Gladewater Books is a rich repository of stories—and the same is true for the town itself. Some of the stories within this former oil boom town on the Sabine River are so compelling, they seem to have been lifted from the pages of fiction.

At the peak of the 1930s East Texas oil boom, for example, a sea of oil derricks filled the town limits of Gladewater. Images of derricks hovering over homes and schools are on display at the excellent Gladewater Museum.

In the 1950s, a young Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash played live at Gladewater's KSJ radio station. And then there was the era—back when Gladewater was one of a few wet towns between Dallas and Shreveport and proliferated with honky-tonks—when a group of upstanding women protesting an unsavory film at the downtown theater were surprised by a stalker who ran through their midst.

Such are the stories of Gladewater, a town thick with pine trees and dripping with wisteria in spring. Gladewater first made a name for itself in 1873 when the Texas and Pacific Railway line built a depot here. The steady train whistles passing through are as much a part of Gladewater now as they were then. And although the 1930s oil boom dried up, a towering replica of the first producing derrick, Snavelly No. 1, serves as a reminder of the black gold heyday.

History still seeps through downtown Gladewater's red-brick streets, now lined with antiques shops purveying first-rate relics of the past. With its museum, bookstore, the historic Walker Manor Bed and Breakfast, and treasury of antiques shops, one could be entertained in Gladewater for days without leaving downtown. Things really get hopping in April for Gusher Days, an annual celebration with music, art, food, and a bass-fishing tournament at Gladewater Lake.

Gladewater native Joe Lansdale, the revered East Texas author of crime stories and macabre thrillers, grew up hunting and fishing in the woods around the Sabine and remembers Gladewater's wilder days.

"When I go back now, it's amazing to see the change from a honky-tonk town, the stomping grounds, at least sometimes, of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and a horde of musicians on their way up," Lansdale says. "All the old honky-tonks are gone, taking a lot of the violence and underworld with them. It is still in some ways a rip in time, and I can't help but feel an occasional burst of nostalgia for it, but I like it as it is now better than how it was then."

—CLAYTON MAXWELL



STAY

WALKER MANOR BED AND BREAKFAST
STARTS AT \$125/NIGHT.
WALKERMANORTX.COM



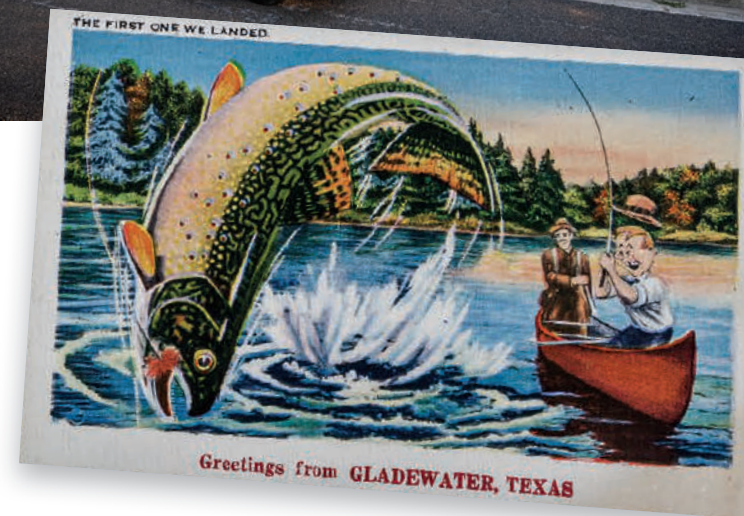
EAT

GUADALUPE'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT
101 E. PACIFIC AVE.
903-845-2318;
FACEBOOK.COM/GUADALUPES
MEXICANRESTAURANT



POPULATION

6,134



XXXXXXXX

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Betty DeRieux and Peter Adams, owners of Gladewater Books; Walker Manor Bed and Breakfast; vintage postcards from the Gladewater Museum.



XXXXXX
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Chocolate malts at the Corner Drug Cafe; Terry Watson in his 1960 Corvette at Clifton Classic Chassis & The Golden Age Gallery of Art and Artifacts; scones and muffins at Corner Drug Cafe; a photo by CV Halstead at the Bosque Art Center.

Clifton

A sign reading “Velkommen” greets travelers arriving in Clifton, nestled in rolling hills 35 miles northwest of Waco. The word means “welcome” in Norwegian, the home country of the immigrants who founded this community in the mid-1800s.

Back then, Cleng Peerson, dubbed the “father of Norwegian immigration to America,” helped thousands of settlers find new homes in the Bosque River valley. More than 100 years later in 1997, the Texas Legislature designated Clifton the “Norwegian Capital of Texas.”

The Norse influence pervades Clifton’s architecture with decorative trim on wooden homes, painted floral folk designs known as “rosemaling” on dishes and other items in downtown shops, and in Norwegian celebrations, such as Norwegian Country Christmas. Held annually on the first weekend of December, the event includes a lighted parade, historical homes tour, and arts and crafts at Heritage Village.

Clifton’s setting among limestone bluffs along the river—the town’s name is a contraction of Cliff Town, its early name—has drawn artists to settle there. One of them, painter George Boutwell, moved to Clifton from Austin in the late 1980s. He bought a secluded piece of land with a two-story Victorian home at the top of a hill. “It was our dream place,” says Boutwell, who was named Texas’ Official State Artist for 2006. “The only negative at the time,” he jokes, “was Clifton had too many artists.”

Clifton’s concentration of artists led to its 2011 designation as a Texas Cultural District. Downtown shops and galleries display a range of local artwork. LA Thompson Gallery of Fine Art, for example, showcases work by area artists Judy Parton, Nancy Boren, and Lloyd Voges.

Public art also pops up around town, especially in the “Art Alley,” where artists have painted colorful murals on the backs of buildings, including *Flocktail Party*, a mural of two-story-tall birds. A short drive west of downtown, the Bosque Arts Center hosts workshops, concerts, and live theater performances.

Besides art, Clifton oozes history, whether it’s at the old-fashioned soda fountain inside the Corner Drug Cafe downtown or across the street at the 1916 Cliftex Theatre, the oldest continuously operated indoor movie theater in Texas.

The nostalgic theme continues nearby at the Clifton Classic Chassis Automobile Museum and Golden Age Gallery of Art and Artifacts. Housed in a former grocery store, the 22,000-square-foot eclectic museum displays 35 cars from

Photos: Tiffany Hofeldt (Clifton)

STAY
SCREEN DOOR INN
 STARTS AT \$99/NIGHT.
 SCREENDOORINN.COM

EAT
CORNER DRUG CAFE
 102 N. AVE. D,
 254-285-7737,
 CORNERDRUGCAFE.COM

POPULATION
 3,465



the 1940s to '80s, including Corvettes, Thunderbirds, Buicks, and Chryslers, plus local memorabilia and Spanish and Mexican art.

Some of Texas’ oldest inhabitants get their due at the Horn Shelter Exhibit at the Bosque Museum west of downtown. It documents a rare 11,800-year-old Paleo-American archeological site excavated nearby where two skeletons and burial artifacts were discovered in 1970. The museum contains a replica of the Horn Shelter with reproduced artifacts and a sculpture of an inhabitant based on facial reconstruction.

Boutwell, whose watercolors of Texas landscapes and rural scenes have built a fan base across Texas and beyond, also operates a gallery on his land, where he welcomes guests from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays or by appointment (call 800-243-4316). A visit reenforces the artistic small-town ethos that characterizes Clifton. “City life can be pretty impersonal,” he says, “but everybody seems to know everybody here. There’s a lot of trust.”

—KATHRYN JONES



QUIRKY PUBLIC ART

Can you name the towns that are home to these local landmarks?

SEE ANSWERS ON PAGE 45

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Photos: Tom McCarthy Jr. (1), Eric Pohl (2), Brandon Jakobeit (3), Will Van Overbeek (4, 5, 6)

XXXXXX



MURAL MADNESS

Do you know where these five murals are located?

SEE ANSWERS ON PAGE 45

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Cuero

Cuero's enthusiasm for cattle and turkeys is obvious even to first-time visitors. Two downtown murals vividly reflect the local devotion. In one, artist Rafael Acosta Jr. portrays a brawny Longhorn and plump turkey grazing in a colorful valley. The other is Acosta's salute to his hometown's turkey-centric legacy with the image of a woman draped in the American flag strolling between a pair of cow-size turkeys.

Located between Victoria and San Antonio, Cuero also boasts an abundance of classic architecture, including the 1896 Romanesque Revival Dewitt County Courthouse and the restored 1892 Proctor-Green House. The latter, a late-Victorian and Colonial Revival home, was converted in 2018 into a guest house—also open for tours—in the Terrell-Reuss Streets Historic District.

But let's talk turkey. The South Texas Coastal Plains are prime habitat for the birds, and during the early 1900s farmers walked their bird-herds to Cuero for processing. As these turkey drives got bigger, thousands of people flocked to Cuero each November to cheer the parade of hens and toms being trotted to the slaughterhouses in time for the holidays. Since 1973, Cuero has celebrated its turkey heritage with Turkeyfest; the 50th anniversary event will be held this Oct. 7-9.



STAY

PROCTOR-GREEN HOUSE
STARTING AT \$150/NIGHT.
CHISHOLMTRAILMUSEUM.ORG/
CUERO-TX-EVENT-SPACES



EAT

BAHNHOF CAFE
213 W. MAIN ST.,
361-275-2211;
FACEBOOK.COM/
BAHNHOFCAFE CUERO



POPULATION

8,128



XXXXXX

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The Green Cow Creamery; the
1896 Dewitt County Courthouse;
downtown Cuero; Chisholm Trail
Heritage Museum.

Shannon Heinold, office manager at the *Cuero Record*, notes the festival replaced the slaughterhouse aspect with entertainment and events including an annual turkey race between Cuero's "Ruby Begonia" and a bird from Worthington, Minnesota. (Like Cuero, Worthington claims the title "Turkey Capital of the World." As if.) "The old photos of the 'turkey trots' are pretty amazing to see," Heinold says, referring to the turkey drives. "But the race—when Ruby wins—is our point of pride these days."

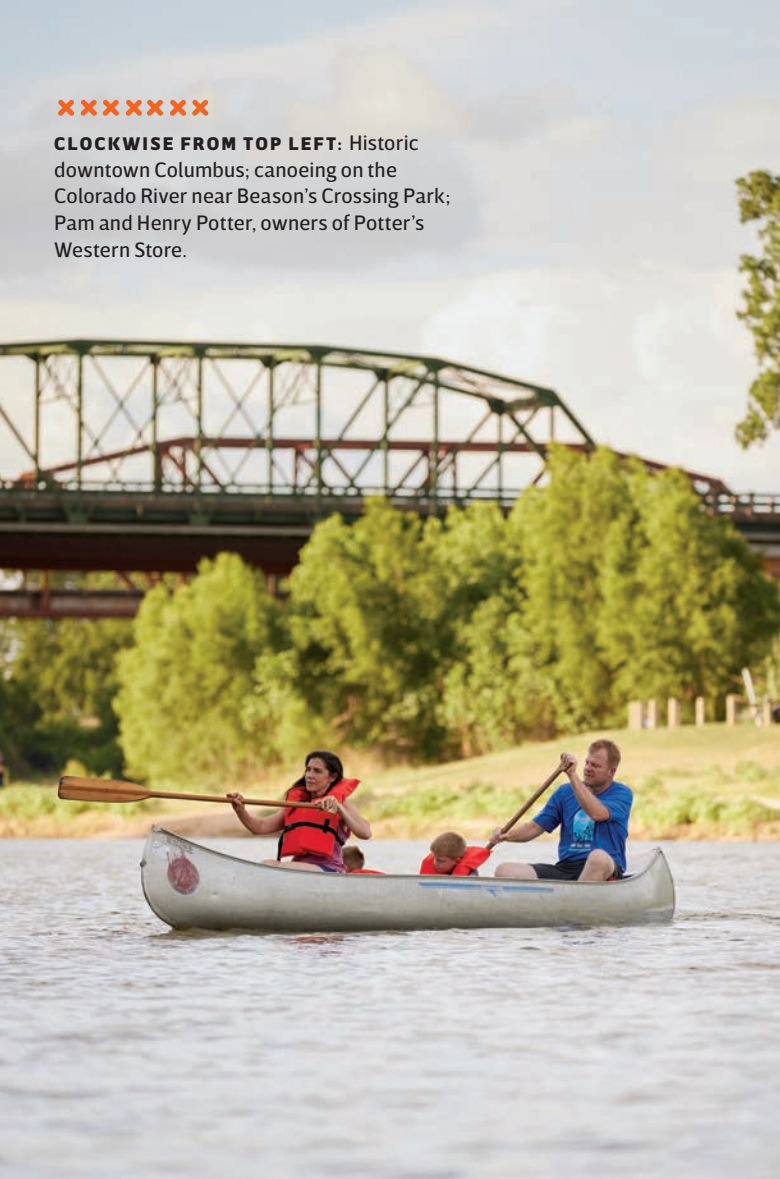
Cuero is an old Spanish word for leather—the perfect name for a town that was an early part of the Chisholm Trail. The first cattle drive left DeWitt County on April 1, 1866, headed for St. Joseph, Missouri, says Kasey Baros, education coordinator for the Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum. "One-fourth of all Texas cattle was raised in the lower Guadalupe River valley in those days," she says. "We were the cattle breadbasket."

Until the late 1880s, when railroads began shipping cattle, the Chisholm and other trails gave rise to the iconic image of Texas cowboys. The museum captures the spirit of those grueling journeys with artifacts such as ledger books, clothing, photographs, and branding irons. A new gallery exploring the culture of American Plains Indians is in the works, too.

The walkable Main Street area brings clear visions of Cuero's future, with historic buildings being renovated for new businesses like The Green Cow Creamery, serving small-batch, homemade ice cream since June. There's also an "Art Alley" with a handful of historical and whimsical images, including a pair of large monarch butterfly wings painted by Acosta on the walls behind city hall. And while there's nary a gobbler or Longhorn to be seen in this al fresco exhibit, it still feels very Cuero: charming, welcoming, and a little surprising.

—ANTHONY HEAD





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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Historic downtown Columbus; canoeing on the Colorado River near Beason's Crossing Park; Pam and Henry Potter, owners of Potter's Western Store.

Columbus

The founding of Columbus predates the Texas Revolution, and its population has held steady at between 3,000 and 4,000 people for the last 60 years. You might think this means not much new is happening in Columbus, which sits at the junction of the Colorado River and Interstate 10, between Houston, San Antonio, and Austin. But you'd be wrong.

For more than five years, new businesses have woven their way through the historic bones of Columbus, creating a compelling mix of traditional and new. Consider Schneider Hall, which, with its barn doors and metal roof, fits perfectly among the towering live oak trees a couple of miles outside of town. From the late 1920s to the early '40s, Amber Becerra's great-great-uncles ran the dance hall. Today, she manages the restored building as a wedding and

event venue. Becerra also owns and operates The Carriage Step B&B near downtown Columbus, a historic home built in the 1890s.

"I have always had a deep love of history and old things," Becerra says. "When the previous owners approached me about purchasing it, I couldn't resist. I bought it with a business partner in 2017, then bought her out at the end of 2018. We've been trucking along since."

Hound Song Brewing Co. has established a loyal following since opening nearly two years ago, its taproom and outdoor space bustling with locals and out-of-towners. Owners Travis and Raven Kocurek were living in Colorado when they chose Columbus as their new home. Travis, who grew up in nearby Weimar, says he envisioned a business that matched the slower pace of life in the country—complete with award-winning craft ales and lagers, and inventive sandwiches and salads. The building, a renovated filling station and bus stop, had been carefully restored as part of the Colorado County Courthouse Historic District.

If children get restless while their parents grab another beer, they can head next door to OST Creamery. Owner Steven Konarik sold his catering company in Austin and relocated to Columbus in 2019. He serves up not just ice cream but also decadently flavored brownies and cookies he bakes himself.

Rounding out the new food and drink options are The House, a coffee and wine bar, and Blake's Kitchen and Kocktailz. Blake Schulte closed his local sports bar to open a restaurant for a new challenge. He says he aimed for "a unique twist of modern and retro" with "a big city atmosphere" as well as a "small town vibe."

Amid the new offerings, historic Columbus continues to thrive. The Live Oak Arts Center, in the restored Brunson Saloon and Whiskey Warehouse, offers rotating exhibits, classes, and workshops in its light-filled spaces. Canoers and kayakers can paddle the Colorado River to Beason's Park where Sam Houston and his troops once camped. And, on old US 90, the Columbus Live Oak, one of the biggest in Texas, still holds court. With its gnarled trunk and limbs so massive they need steel supports, the tree took root centuries before Sam Houston—and it will be around to see what further changes find their way to Columbus and other small towns across the state.

—STACEY SWANN

STAY
THE CARRIAGE STEP B&B
 STARTS AT \$135/NIGHT.
 THECARRIAGESTEP.COM

EAT
HOUND SONG BREWING CO.
 535 WALNUT ST.
 979-500-4253;
 HOUNDSONGBREWING.COM

POPULATION
3,699

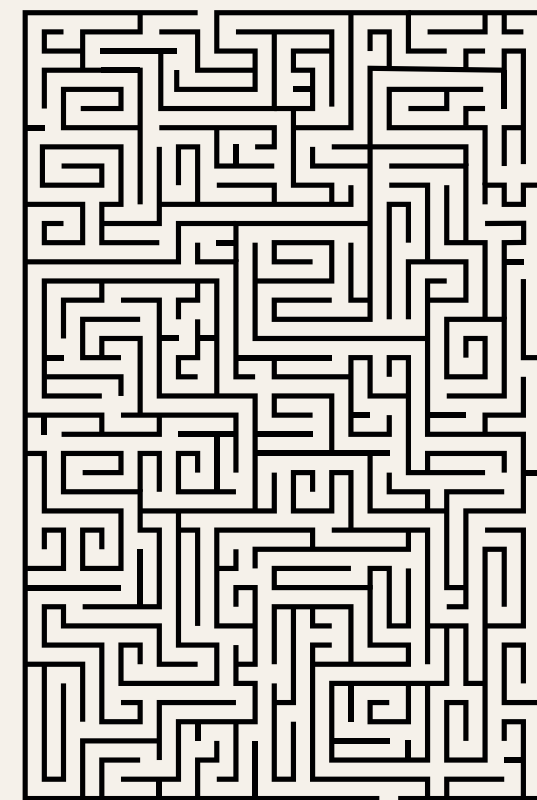


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A-MAZE-ING FUN

Can you help them find their way?



ANSWERS

COURTHOUSES from page 38: 1 Bosque County, 2 Potter County, 3 Tom Green County, 4 Donley County, 5 Cass County. **QUIRKY ART** from page 41: 1 Poteet, 2 Cedar Creek, 3 Paris, 4 Marfa, 5 Fort Stockton, 6 Glen Rose, 7 Beaumont. **MURALS** from page 42: 1 Clifton, 2 Wimberley, 3 Navasota, 4 Lufkin, 5 Gladewater.

