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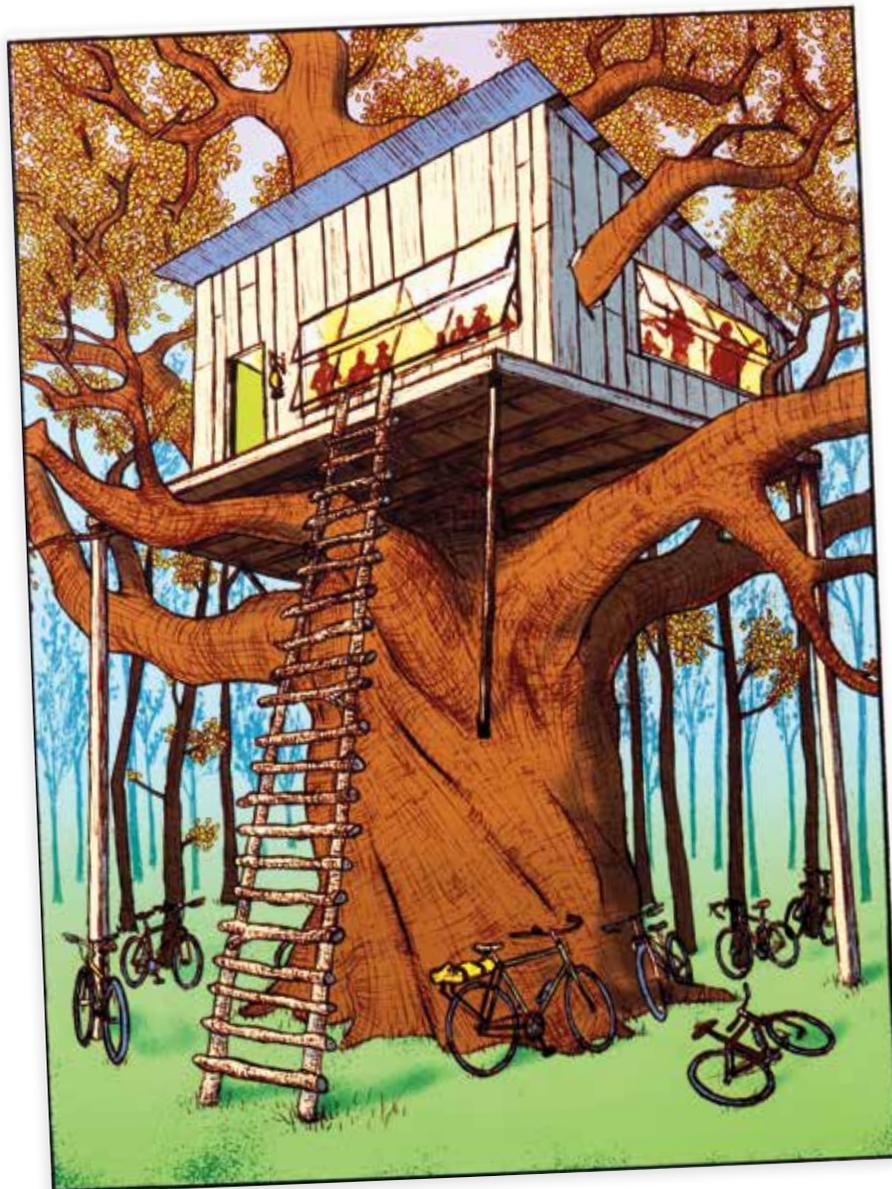
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THE GOOD LIFE, TEXAS STYLE.



Vision with Volume

The Flatstock poster show at South by Southwest

story by **Matt Joyce**

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL FIND AT SOUTH by Southwest, Austin's annual summit of creative industries and popular culture. President Obama showed up in 2016 to talk technology and tacos. In 2012, Doritos hosted a party with rapper Snoop Dogg performing on a stage built to look like a five-story snack vending machine. And in 2007, Twitter famously took flight during the conference. The cultural stampede can be a bit overwhelming, especially for those who aren't jetting in on business accounts to network at the festival's technology, film, and music conventions. But tucked within the Austin Convention Center, there's an engaging

Flatstock is one of SXSW's most accessible activities for curious locals and tourists.

exhibition that is one of SXSW's most accessible activities for curious locals and tourists: the Flatstock poster show.

Organized by the American Poster Institute, Flatstock draws about 80 poster artists to Austin each year during the SXSW Music Festival. The artists come from across the globe to mingle with peers, market their work to bands and industry types, and display their screen-printed posters, particularly music posters promoting bands, concerts, and festivals.

Strolling through Flatstock feels somewhat like navigating a carnival midway as barkers pitch their games and rides. But it's not the artists themselves calling out; it's their splashy artwork that screams from the walls: Don't miss this rock show! Never forget that amazing festival! Check out my crazy colorful design!

"These are all real grassroots designers making artwork basically as close to from the soul as you can get in the world of commercial art," says Mark Brickey, a graphic designer from Los Angeles who hosts a podcast called Adventures in Design. "Where you and I are standing right now, this is the intersection where commercial art and fine art meet."

Flatstock is free and kid-friendly and features a stage that hosts about six bands each afternoon. Because the exhibition is located at the heart of the conference, thousands of touring musicians, industry reps, and fans filter through, providing a glimpse of the energetic, creative, and collaborative spirit that makes SXSW such a touchstone of popular culture.

Flatstock also bolsters the fundamental artistic element of music by honoring handmade artwork. The screen-printed posters offer balance to an industry that now reaches its audience mostly through touchscreens.

"The popularity of gig posters has been a reaction to the coldness of digital media," says Terrence Ryan, aka Lil' Tuffy, a San Francisco artist and co-president of the American Poster

Institute. "The decline of music packaging—CD sales and record sales—has also been a factor. There's a desire to have things that are handmade and personal."

Rock poster artwork traces its roots to the 1960s in San Francisco and Austin, where underground comic-book artists were recruited to draw posters promoting concerts. At Flatstock,

elements of Austin's music history from the past 40 years are on display at a booth hosted by the South Austin Popular Culture Center.

Artist Danny Garrett held court at the booth last year, signing copies of his book *Weird yet Strange: Notes from an Austin Music Artist*. Garrett started drawing music posters in 1971 and has worked with the likes of Willie Nelson,



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Festival season is tuning up this spring on San Marcos' Downtown Square.

April 7-9: Swing On The Square features all things Western Swing – bands, dance contest and a Gospel Brunch with BBQ.

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Andy McDougall, of British Columbia, Canada, will return this year to demonstrate screen-printing at SXSW's Flatstock Poster Show. Below, the Jackknife booth.



Hopewell's imaginative artwork reflects the incredible diversity on display among the 55 booths in the convention center. Most of the posters cost about \$30, and many of the artists also sell their artwork on lower-priced collectibles like T-shirts, koozies, pins, and stickers. Although most of the posters promote bands and concerts, you'll also see artwork related to sports, politics, movies, and nature.

That's what I find at the Biscuit Press booth featuring the screen prints of Austin artist Dan Grissom. Among Grissom's posters was one depicting the tranquil scene of a stout, gnarly tree set in the middle of a deep forest at dusk. Bicycles lean against the base of the trunk, and a ladder climbs to a tree house built into the canopy of twisting branches. Warm yellow light glows from the tree house windows, highlighting the silhouettes of people playing instruments, dancing, and visiting. I paused as the scene transported me away from the noisy convention center and into the forest, riding my bike

Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Antone's, the seminal Austin blues club.

"The very fact that there still is a gig poster scene going on and the fact that for more than a dozen years now it's had a place at South by Southwest and other music conferences, I think that's incredible," Garrett says. "Because really, this whole thing started out with people trying to describe psychedelic music as it was emerging in the mid-'60s in San Francisco with art. I think that led directly to what me and my colleagues did, and it's still going on."

Flatstock itself, which hosts a series of poster shows throughout the year in the United States and Europe, has certainly had a hand in perpetuating

poster art since the show debuted in San Francisco in 2002. In 2016, I met two artists who took up printmaking after discovering it during visits to SXSW. One of them was Chris Hopewell, a poster artist from Bristol, England, whose Jackknife studio's eye-catching work draws on the imagery of comic-book heroines, beer can labels, and motorcycles.

"I came to South by Southwest because I was working in a different branch of music at the time, making music videos, and I discovered this," Hopewell says. "I fell in love with the whole idea of poster making, so I went back and bought a printing deck and started doing it."

to a tree-house gathering with friends and music—a magical adult fairyland of sorts.

As it turns out, Grissom had created the poster only a couple of weeks earlier for a Dallas-based environmental charity called RETREET. The group organizes weekend "Retreets" to plant trees for residents in places that have been damaged by natural disasters, while taking along their bikes for transportation and recreational rides. Since its founding in 2012, RETREET has planted trees in Bastrop, Wimberley, Lancaster, Cleburne, Rowlett, and the Possum Kingdom area as well as out of state.

"The popularity of gig posters has been a reaction to the coldness of digital media. There's a desire to have things that are handmade and personal."

Grady McGahan, the founder and director of RETREET, tells me later that Grissom's poster captures RETREET's fundamental values of trees, community, inclusion, and fun. "The tree is unique in that forest. It has a Berenstain Bears feel to it," he says. "There's a nostalgia for me looking at that image, nostalgia for this new thing that I think is a powerful motif that really draws you in: Come and climb this ladder, we're having a great time up here, everyone is welcome."

Now framed and hanging on a wall of my home, the poster evokes a similar reaction when I pause for a moment to focus on it or introduce the scene to friends. You truly never know what you'll find at South by Southwest. **L**



FLATSTOCK

takes place March 16-18 in Hall 4 of the Austin Convention Center during the South by Southwest Conference & Festivals. Admission is free. www.sxsw.com/exhibitions/flatstock.

IN THE GALLERY

PORTRAITS OF FREEDOM

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Featuring compositions drawn from runaway slave advertisements aggregated by the Texas Runaway Slave Project. The path from slavery to freedom in Texas is narrated through a range of mediums including drawing, painting, lithography, and screen-printing.

Made possible in part by a grant from Humanities Texas, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

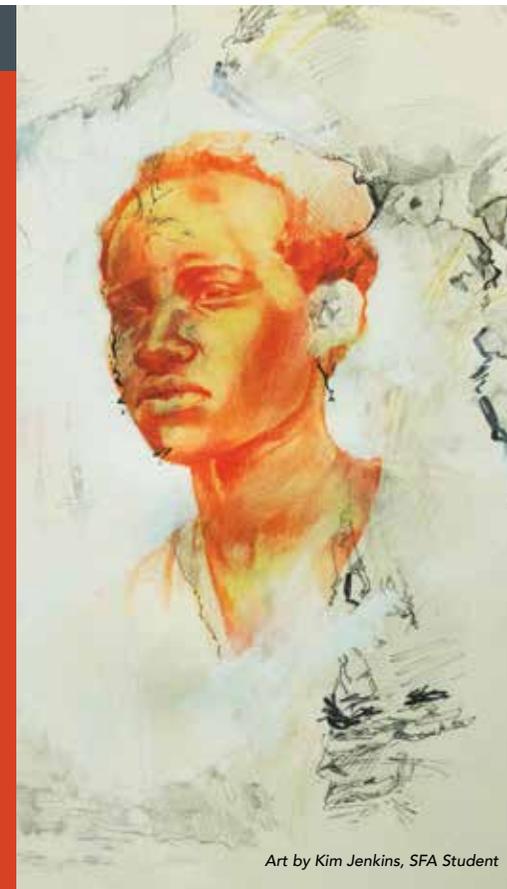


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Art by Kim Jenkins, SFA Student

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March 11th

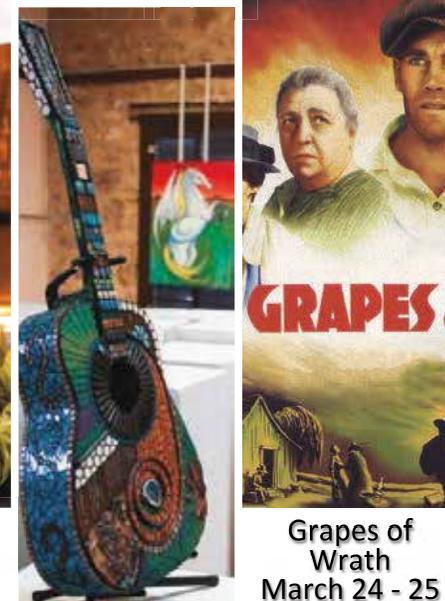


Stribling Art Extravaganza
March 24 - 25



Craft Beer Festival
March 25th

John Steinbeck
GRAPES OF WRATH
March 24 - 25



Grapes of Wrath
March 24 - 25



For more events go to VisitSanAngelo.org



BIG THICKET DRIFT

**CANOEING THE LOWER NECHES RIVER
THROUGH BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE**

STORY BY MATT JOYCE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANDON JAKOBEIT



“IT’S NOT TOO OFTEN THAT YOU JUST DON’T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO,”

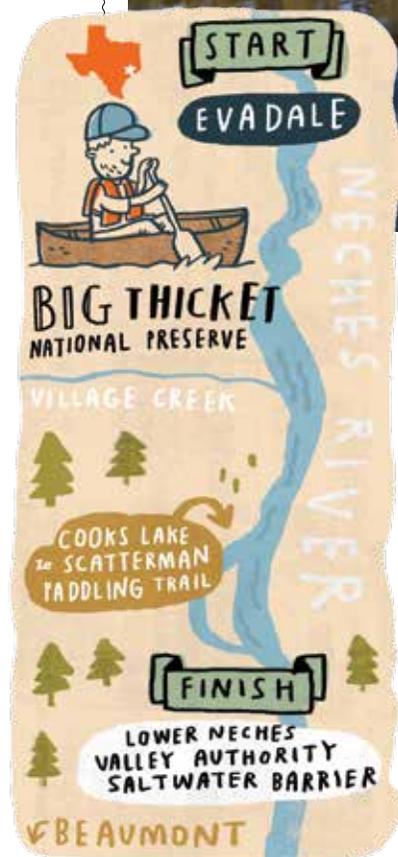
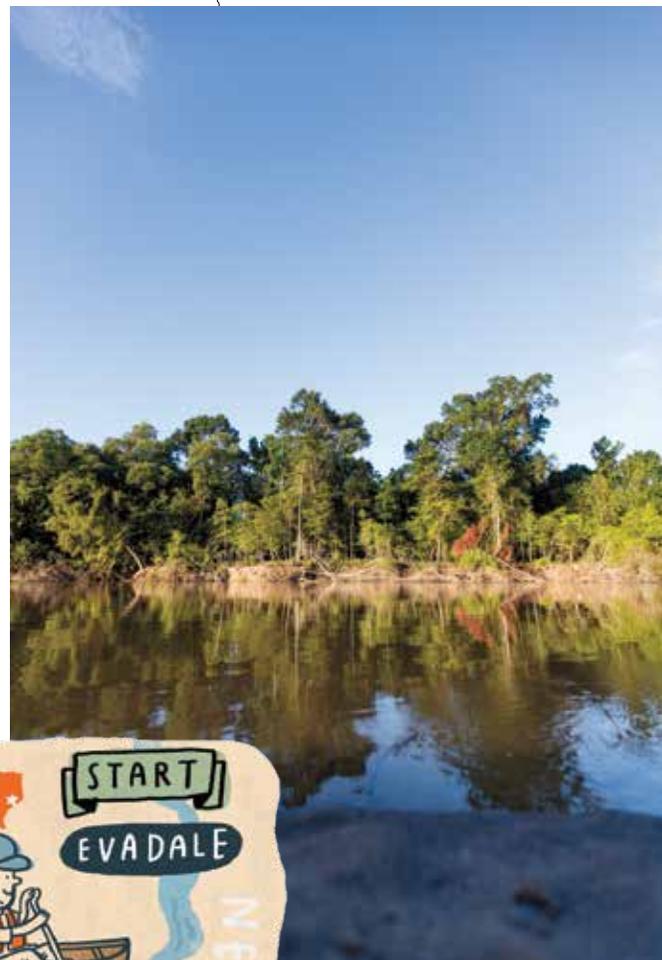
our guide remarked as we lounged on the sandy shoreline of the Neches River in East Texas, cooling off in the water after a day of canoeing. Across the caramel-tinted river, a dense forest crowded the dirt bluff on the opposite bank. Behind us, our loaded canoes rested on the edge of a broad, empty sandbar, its semicircle beach mirroring the luminous half-moon overhead.

True, we’d been bobbing in the shallow rapids for a half-hour or so to keep cool on that sunny July afternoon. But it would be misleading to imply we had nothing to do.

We’d paddled about 10 miles that day. Soon we would set up our tents, cast a lazy fishing line, cook a camp-stove dinner, and start a driftwood fire to accompany our tall tales and guitar strumming. We had plenty to do—just not the type of checklist fodder that dominates the clock-driven days of routine life.

When floating the Neches River through the depths of the Big Thicket, I was beginning to realize, it’s best to put your schedules and anxieties on the backburner and let the river’s current, meanders, and scenery be your guide. In other words—go with the flow.

I had embarked that morning from a boat ramp near Evadale with *Texas Highways* photographer Brandon Jakobeit and guides Gerald Cerda and Jason Connolly of Big Thicket Outfitters. In two canoes loaded with ice chests, cooking gear, tents, bedding, folding chairs, clothes, and a guitar, we followed the lower Neches River through the Big Thicket National Preserve to a takeout point in north



Beaumont. For three days, we floated through a diversity of Big Thicket waterscapes, soaking in the beauty, culture, and history of this inconspicuous East Texas natural wonder.

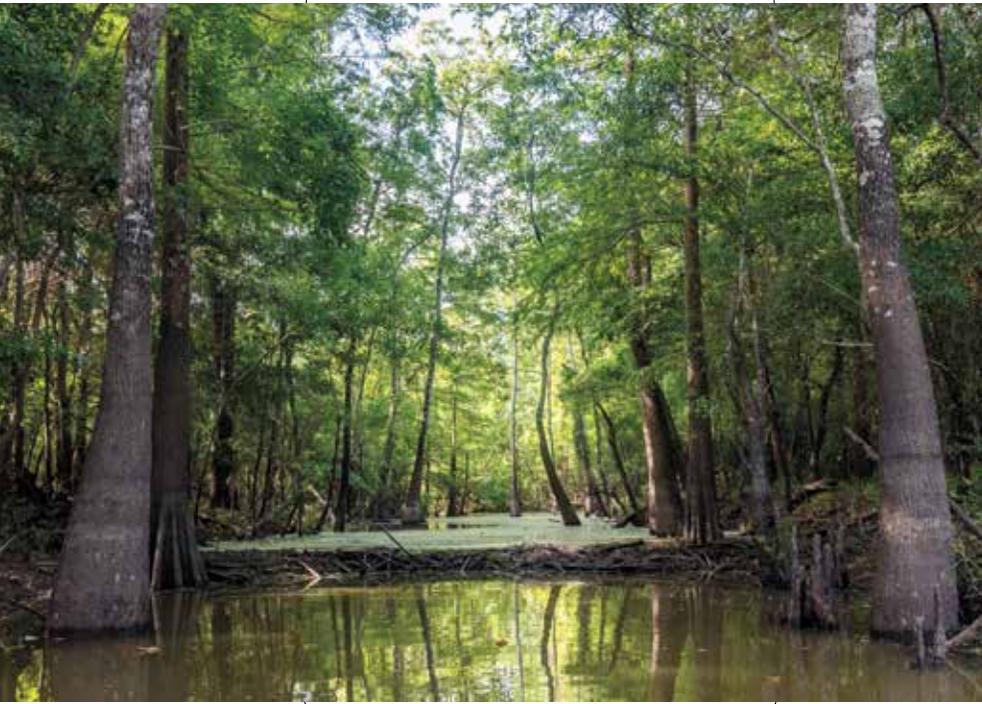
AS WE PADDLED around the first few bends in the river, it became apparent that we had gotten lucky with nearly ideal conditions—clear skies, a swift current, and fresh sandbars. Months of flooding in 2015 and early 2016 had scoured brush and trash from the sandbars and built them up with freshly deposited sand. Moreover, the river level had dropped in the previous weeks, uncovering the sandbars and channeling the river into a consistent flow.

“The river is constantly changing,” noted Cerda, who started Big Thicket Outfitters in 2012 after exploring the lower Neches recreationally since his



GOING WITH THE FLOW

The Big Thicket National Preserve protects the Neches River corridor from B.A. Steinhagen Lake to Beaumont, an 80-mile stretch with forested shorelines and occasional riverside cabins where everyone’s got a boat.



childhood. “You know that saying? A man never steps in the same river twice, because it’s not the same river, and he isn’t the same man.”

The Neches River originates from a spring in Van Zandt County and flows southeast 416 miles before emptying into Sabine Lake and the Gulf of Mexico. Starting at Town Bluff Dam, which forms B.A. Steinhagen Lake near Jasper, the river serves more or less as an 80-mile eastern boundary of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

The Big Thicket ecosystem once covered nearly 3 million acres, from the Neches west to the Trinity River, and from Woodville down to Beaumont. Only about 3 percent of the Big Thicket survives intact today, according to the National Park Service. The Big Thicket National Preserve protects 112,000 acres in a patchwork of 15 units across seven counties. Our float trip gave us a river-level view of the Big Thicket’s renowned ecological diversity, particularly the bottomland hardwood forests bordering the river and the sloughs and bayous of cypress and tupelo forests.

The Neches River’s sandbars were a central part of our canoe trip. We spent most of our days paddling downriver, sometimes leaving the main channel to explore swift-moving side courses, swampy lakes, and bayous. We docked

**OUR
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FORESTS.**

on the sandbars for swimming and picnic breaks, and for camping at night. (Most moderately fit people could handle this trip if they’re comfortable with being in a canoe for a few days and tent-camping.) Because sandbars are part of the public streambed, they’re open for camping. The national preserve requires permits for camping in its section of the river; permits are free and easy to acquire, either by phone or at the visitor center in Kountze.

Sandbars have always been one of the Neches River’s defining characteristics. The first Europeans to record their observations of the river in the 1500s called it *Río de Nievas*, or River of Snow, because of the white sand. There are at least two explanations for how the Neches got its contemporary name—one holds that a Spaniard named the river after the Neches Indians, a Caddoan tribe from the region; another is that the Spaniards adopted the name used by the Caddos, who called the river “nachawi,” their word for the bois d’arc tree. Whatever the case, historians believe that the natives of the area traveled by rivers and creeks as an alternative to the dense thicket. It’s hard to imagine that these pre-Texans didn’t frequent the sandbars as well.

Different chapters of Neches River history and culture bubbled to the surface throughout our float. We encountered fishermen angling for catfish and crappie with trotlines and fishing poles as well as funky wooden fishing cabins—some houseboats and some built on stilts on the shore. Near Vidor, we docked briefly to visit with jovial riverside residents kayaking and swimming off their back porches.

The Neches River basin has long been timber country; loggers once used this section of the river to float timber to mills in Beaumont. Large cypress tree

NATURAL HABITAT

Above, a beaver dam forms a pool on a creek that feeds Banks Bayou. Right, a campsite on a picturesque Neches River sandbar.

**THE
BIG THICKET
ASSOCIATION**

hosts the Neches River Rally each September to raise funds for its conservation mission. At texashighways.com, read expanded coverage of the association and the rally.





stumps with distinct rings around their bases are remnants of a century-old logging technique, Cerda said. Loggers would score the trunks in the summer to injure the trees and then return in the winter to cut and float them to the mill.

Early in the trip, we canoed under an old railroad swing bridge with a massive gear on its underside, possibly a mechanism for the bridge to turn and make way for riverboat traffic, which mostly ceased by 1900. We also paddled by the rusted remnants of shoreline docks for early 20th-century oil-and-gas operations, along with infrastructure for ongoing energy production in the Big Thicket.

With the exception of birds, wildlife in the Big Thicket kept a pretty low profile during our trip, but creature clues greeted us at every stop. Tracks in the sand and mud hinted at deer, raccoons, birds, dogs, and feral hogs. During the trip, I spotted three deer, a beaver, turtles, alligator gar, mullet fish, minnows, and an unidentified water snake.

Also on the sandbars, we found numerous shells from freshwater bivalve mussels, some as large as taco shells. The mussels scoot around the sandy river bottom, filtering water through their bodies to feed on microorganisms. When the water recedes, you can see the mussels' beautifully random paths in the sand, resembling the squiggly doodles on a junior high notebook.

Each morning at dawn, a growing chorus of birdsong ushered in the day. Occasionally, the rattle of a woodpecker would roll across the river valley. I saw a pileated woodpecker cross the river with its distinctive flap-swoop-flap-swoop flying motion. Cardinals, little blue herons, wood ducks, vultures, and great egrets accompanied us throughout the journey. And a first for me: swallow-tailed kites—a raptor characterized by its scissortail and sleek black-and-white body—circled overhead a few times.

At night, the sounds of owls, cicadas, crickets, and frogs provided the backdrop for our campfire tales. On our second night of camping, shortly after bedtime, a motorboat with a spotlight startled me awake and called to mind the unsettling banjo strains of *Deliverance*. Turns out it was some locals “bullfrogging”—hunting for fat frogs to fry.

The day before embarking on the canoe trip, I had visited the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center in Kountze to study up on my surroundings. Built in the shade of a loblolly pine forest and set in a Craftsman-style log building, the center presents exhibits about the Big Thicket's history, ecology, and wildlife, such as alligators, bobcats, mountain lions, and snakes. Historically, black bear, jaguars, and red wolves also roamed the area.

RIVER SOUNDS

Left, guide Jason Connolly contemplates the Neches. Right, Big Thicket Outfitters proprietor Gerald Cerda picks a tune after setting up a sandbar campsite.



“YOU KNOW THAT SAYING? A MAN NEVER STEPS IN THE SAME RIVER TWICE, BECAUSE IT’S NOT THE SAME RIVER, AND HE ISN’T THE SAME MAN.”

“People ask about bears, about mountain lions, about snakes,” Ranger Mary Kay Manning said. “And I tell them, honestly, the things I’m worried about are mosquitoes and ticks because of the diseases they can transmit. The mammals are going to stay away from people.”

Thusly warned, we brought plenty of bug repellent along. As it turned out, the mosquitoes weren’t a major factor on the river or the sandbars (we stayed out of the forest for the most part), but they could be an annoyance at dusk. Just be sure to keep mosquitoes out of your tent for the night!

Big Thicket National Preserve’s most popular paddling destination is Village Creek, a tributary of the Neches River that meanders southeast through the Piney Woods and Big Thicket. Big Thicket Outfitters does about 90 percent of its canoe and kayak rental business on Village Creek, Cerda said, because the creek is good for shorter trips, ranging from a couple of hours to overnight camping trips. Village Creek runs through similar terrain as the lower Neches, but the waterway is narrower. Near Lumberton, Village Creek State Park offers developed campsites with bathrooms.

But our river journey provided a broader perspective of the lower Neches. Dense hardwood forests dominated the shoreline for the first three-quarters of our trip. Sixty-foot, spindly trees such as water oak, river birch, and loblolly pine crowded each other along the precipice of the dirt bank, looking like marathon runners jockeying for position



at the starting line. Erosion exposed the trees' roots on the bank, while willow trees reached their green, leafy branches out over the river, providing moments of shade as our canoes floated beneath. Yaupon holly and sweetgum filled the understory, and flowering vines like trumpet creeper and wisteria added splashes of red and orange to the greenery.

I didn't see a single alligator on this trip, although I kept my eyes peeled for them, especially as we ventured into the lakes and sloughs that characterized the last quarter of our trip. Not far from Beaumont, we detoured off the Neches River and onto Scatterman Lake to follow the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department paddling trail known as "Cooks Lake to Scatterman." The 4.8-mile loop is the setting of the Big Thicket Association's Neches River Rally, an annual September event for canoeists and kayakers to explore this section of the Neches River, Pine Island Bayou, and offshoot lakes and sloughs.

HAPPY TRAILS

The 4.8-mile Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail branches off the Neches River and explores beautiful sections of cypress and tupelo forest. Above, the weathered trunk of an old cypress known as the "Madonna tree" bears a faint resemblance to artistic depictions of the Virgin Mary.

THE PADDLING TRAIL TOOK US THROUGH THE FAIRY-TALE SETTING OF A SUN-DAPPLED SLOUGH FULL OF CYPRESS AND TUPELO TREES, WHERE THE LIGHT TOOK ON A SHADOWY, EMERALD QUALITY.

The paddling trail took us through the fairy-tale setting of a sun-dappled slough full of cypress and tupelo trees, where the light took on a shadowy, emerald quality. Witch-es-beard lichen and verdant ferns sprouted from the gnarly old trees. We maneuvered our canoes around the trees' knobby knees and ducked below massive spider webs in the branches. The forest muffled all sound except for the water trickling around our paddles. With a flash of white and a rustle of leaves, a hidden great egret splashed the surface and flapped toward the sky.

Leaving the silence of the water forest and rejoining the river, we paddled our way to a ramp near the Neches River Saltwater Barrier and pulled our canoes ashore. We were tired, hot, and sun-beaten, but in the calm, clearheaded, and refreshed way that comes from immersing yourself in nature for a few days.

"They call this a hidden gem," Cerda said as we surveyed the journey. "If it is a hidden gem, would more people come here if they knew about it?"

I tend to think so. Three months later, I returned to the lower Neches River, this time with my family in tow, for the Neches River Rally. We paddled along the leafy riverbank, spotting egrets and jumping fish, and marveled at the wondrously odd cypress trees that stretch from the water's murky surface to the sky. I could tell my family was just as captivated as I was. **L**

TH Associate Editor Matt Joyce never thought he would find the Neches River's murky waters so appealing. TH Photography Editor Brandon Jakobeit loves the alternative perspective that comes with a float down the river.

ESSENTIALS: BIG THICKET PADDLING

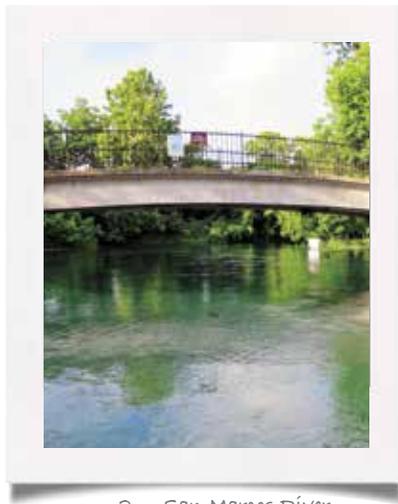
Big Thicket Outfitters offers a range of guiding and boat-rental services on the lower Neches River, Village Creek, and the Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail. Canoe and kayak rentals cost about \$45 a day, with additional costs for customized guiding services. Call 409/786-1884; www.bigthicketoutfitters.com.

The Big Thicket National Preserve encompasses 80 miles of the Neches River and 35 miles of Village Creek, including most of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's 21-mile Village Creek Paddling Trail. For information on paddling in the preserve, including permits and local outfitters, call 409/951-6700; www.nps.gov/bith.

The 4.8-mile **Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail**, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department-designated trail, is accessible from the boat ramp at the Lower Neches Valley Authority Saltwater Barrier. www.tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/inland/cookslake_scatterman/index.phtml.



1 — Colorado River



2 — San Marcos River



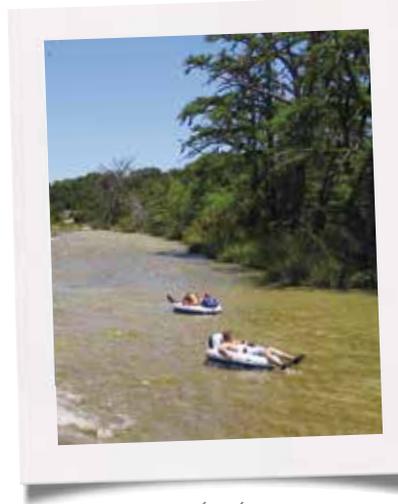
3 — Comal River



4 — Medina River



5 — Sabinas River



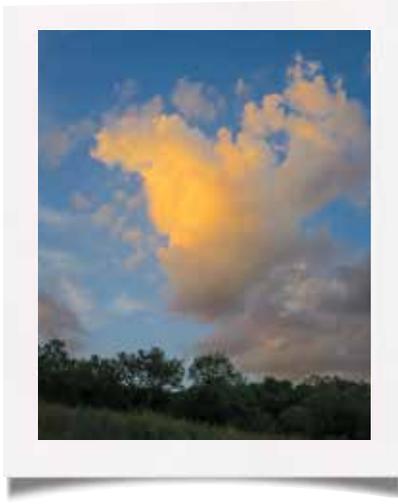
6 — Frio River



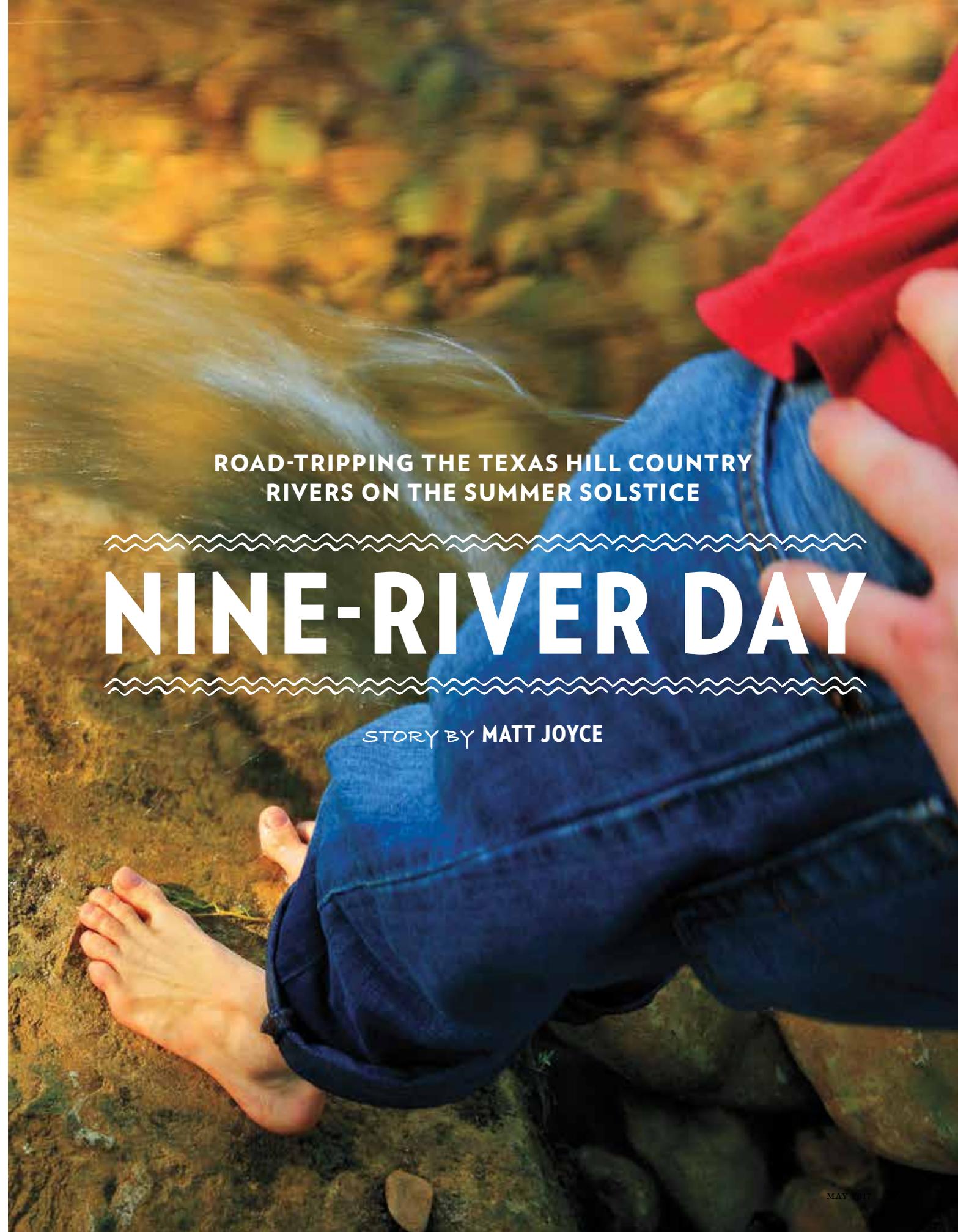
7 — Guadalupe River



8 — Blanco River



9 — Pedernales River



ROAD-TRIPPING THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY
RIVERS ON THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

NINE-RIVER DAY

STORY BY MATT JOYCE

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE SUMMER SOLSTICE THAT INSPIRES ADVENTURE.

As the official start of summer and the longest day of the year, the solstice illuminates a world of possibility with more than 14 hours of daylight. On June 21 this year, the sun will rise at 6:30 in the morning and shine until 8:36 at night. What better excuse to explore the outdoors?

I was pondering this potential last June as reports from around the Hill Country carried news of a rainy spring that had replenished the aquifers and swelled creeks and rivers. Numerous watersheds bisect the Edwards Plateau as spring-fed rivulets flow into creeks and rivers en route to the Gulf of Mexico.

Other parts of the world have their natural wonders, but it's hard to beat the summertime satisfaction of swimming in a pristine Texas Hill Country river. Add the summer heat of late June, stretch the day into solstician proportions—and a refreshing challenge began to take shape. “How many different rivers could I swim in in one day?” I asked myself, pulling out a map and gauging the distances.

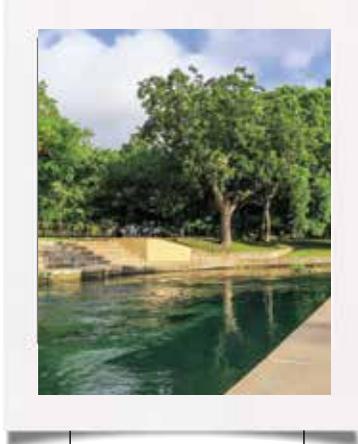
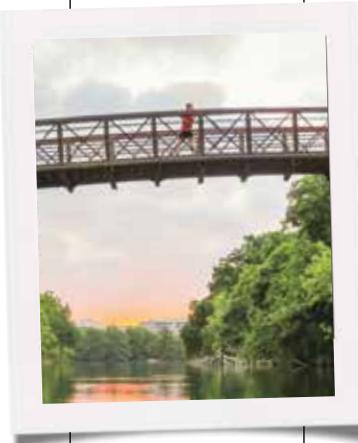
I scanned the state southwest from Austin and walked my fingers across the map's squiggly blue lines, hopping from river to river like playing a game of Chutes and Ladders. I envisioned a western loop from Austin to Concan and back—an excursion across scenic Hill Country canyons, savannas, and river bottoms with stops for plunging into cold rivers, hiking rocky trails, and snacking on small-town eats.

A plan in place, I set my sights on a nine-river day.

1 COLORADO RIVER, AUSTIN

A speck of yellow light flickered across the ebony waters of Lady Bird Lake as I launched a rental kayak from the Texas Rowing Center dock and paddled my way into the pre-dawn darkness. The speck was a fishing skiff, my only company on this stretch of the Colorado River in downtown Austin at 6 a.m.

As I paddled downstream, the pale light of daybreak revealed the sights and sounds of the city waking up. Runners churned along the gravel hike-and-bike trail looping the lake,



Morning breaks over Lady Bird Lake on the Colorado River in Austin; paved sidewalks and grassy lawns line the San Marcos River at Sewell Park; boats await paddlers on the Comal River in New Braunfels.

the hum of traffic grew, and the first rays of sun illuminated downtown's glassy buildings in reflected shades of lavender and peach.

I navigated up the Barton Creek inlet to the spillway below Barton Springs Pool, watching the water's surface simmer with rising fish and swarms of swifts swooping for insects. Landing the kayak on a dirt bank, I dove into the water for a refreshing jolt. It wasn't until I emerged that I realized I had interrupted a photographer's daybreak photo shoot with a tattooed bikini model. Only in Austin...

2 SAN MARCOS RIVER, SAN MARCOS

The morning was cool and comfortable, but signs of the day's gathering heat mounted as an angle of sunshine widened across the shady lawn at Sewell Park at Texas State University.

Devouring breakfast tacos from nearby Lolita's Cafe, I peered over the canopy of pecan trees and watched sunlight engulf the red spires of the 114-year-old Old Main, the oldest building on campus.

I held my breath and jumped into the San Marcos River's cleansing current, brushing my feet against the wispy, kelly-green leaves of Texas wild rice—a species found only here. Floating downstream, I pictured the water bubbling from the Edwards Aquifer into Spring Lake, the river's headwaters only 1,000 feet upstream from the park.

Photos: Matt Joyce; © Jenny Sathngam (right)





Bald cypress trees line the Medina River near Bandera; a barbecue sandwich at the Ranger Crossing of the Medina River; swimmers play in the Sabinal River at Utopia Park.

3 COMAL RIVER, NEW BRAUNFELS

The water of the spring-fed Comal River—the state’s shortest river—appeared shiny blue-green as I walked down to the river at Prince Solms Park in New Braunfels. But standing on the bank, I could see clearly down 10 feet to the bottom, where perch and bass darted among the vegetation.

Three hours into the day, I was already on my third river, and I had bypassed chances to access two others (the Guadalupe and Blanco), saving them for later stops. This was a reoccurring theme: I passed up numerous chances to stop at inviting swimming holes—Guadalupe River State Park, Privilege Creek near Bandera, Williams Creek in Tarpley, and others—as I held to my schedule.

I had no tube to ride Prince Solms Park’s short tube chute, which lies just upstream from the colossal Schlitterbahn Water Park, so I swam a bit and then took a seat at a picnic table under a stout live oak tree. Nearby, children from a summer science camp dipped fishnets in the water, and submerged



scuba divers explored the river’s depths, leaving a trail of bubbles percolating on the surface.

“It’s a very relaxing environment down there,” diver Ben Flores of New Braunfels told me, relaying how he’s recovered everything from GoPro cameras to diamond rings, key chains, bikini tops, and even a prosthetic leg from the river’s floor. “I can’t afford to go to Cozumel every day, but I can swim and dive here every day.”

4 MEDINA RIVER, BANDERA

A few bystanders glanced over quiz-zically as I scrambled around to take pictures of my barbecue sandwich, which I had balanced on a cypress-tree root on the bank of the Medina River.

The image turned out pretty well, I thought, capturing the meaty sandwich (from Sid’s Main Street BBQ in Bandera) in the riverside’s sun-dappled light against a background of an emerald river and towering cypress trees.

Apparently I was getting a bit lost in my own thoughts on this fourth stop of my nine-river journey. But I snapped to attention when I jumped into the cool water and semi-swift current of the Medina River at the Ranger Crossing on Texas 16, a few miles west of Bandera.

After drifting downstream in the chest-deep water, I turned and swam against the current, spellbound by the water-level view of the river upstream. The cypress-lined banks enveloped the Medina like the walls of a Spanish Colonial chapel; the pristine river stretched to the horizon where it converged with the pale blue sky.

Photos: © Eric W. Pohl (top left); Matt Joyce

5 SABINAL RIVER, UTOPIA

The Hill Country terrain buckled into steeper and taller slopes as I drove west across Bandera County to Utopia Park. Here, a dam creates a broad swimming hole on the Sabinal River, which rises upstream near Lost Maples State Natural Area.

I noticed some other visitors fishing, so I grabbed my pole and cast a line as well. As I stood on the grassy bank, I thought back to a recent conversation with Doug Wierman, a hydrologist and fellow with the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University.

Wierman had explained that most of the Hill Country’s rivers surface in the Edwards Plateau region. The rivers give and take from shallow aquifers, and both the rivers and aquifers depend heavily on rainfall.

“What makes these rivers so unique is that the originating waters and springs are very nutrient-deficient—there’s very little nitrogen compounds or phosphorous—and that’s what discourages algae and makes them so nice and clear and pretty,” he said.

The water’s clarity made it possible for me to see several perch ignoring my lure. So I reeled in my line and jumped in the water.

6 FRIO RIVER, GARNER STATE PARK

“Sorry, the park’s at capacity. We’ve been closed since 1:30,” the Garner State Park gate attendant informed me as I pulled into the entrance at about 2:15 p.m.

Rats. I had been looking forward to renting an inner tube for a short float on the Frio River, as well as an ice cream cone from the park concessions stand. I know that Garner is the state’s busiest park, but it didn’t occur to me that it would be full by early afternoon on a weekday.

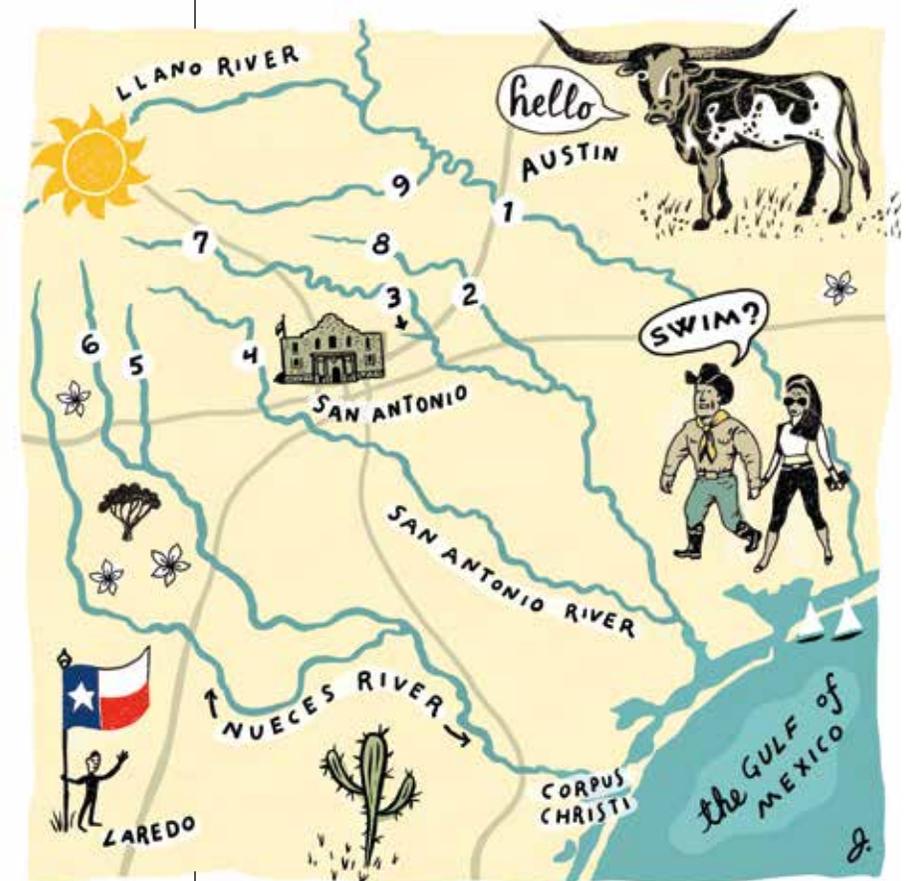
So I drove a short distance to a bridge on Ranch Road 1050, where I parked on the roadside and walked a trail down to the river. Here, water about 18 inches deep washes swiftly across a broad, flat limestone riverbed.

I sat down with my back against the current and watched cliff swallows dart around the bridge as tubers floated by. In the distance, a ridge of green hills undulated across the baby-blue mid-afternoon sky.

Illustration by John S. Dykes

ESSENTIALS

- 1 **Colorado River (Lady Bird Lake): Texas Rowing Center**, 1541 W. Cesar Chavez in Austin. Call 512/467-7799; www.texasrowingcenter.com.
- 2 **San Marcos River: Sewell Park**, 700-1 Aquarena Springs Drive in San Marcos. Call 512/245-2004; www.campusrecreation.txstate.edu/outdoor/sewell-park.html.
- 3 **Comal River: Prince Solms Park**, 100 Liebscher Drive in New Braunfels. Call 830/608-2165; www.nbtexas.org/1691/Prince-Solms-Park.
- 4 **Medina River: Ranger Crossing**, about three miles west of Bandera on Texas 16.
- 5 **Sabinal River: Utopia Park**, 241 Utopia Park Road in Utopia. Call 830/966-3643; www.utopiapark.org.
- 6 **Frio River: Garner State Park**, 234 Ranch Road 1050 in Concan. Call 830/232-6132; www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/garner.
- 7 **Guadalupe River: The Ingram Dam**, about eight miles west of Kerrville on Texas 39.
- 8 **Blanco River: Blanco State Park**, 101 Park Road 23 in Blanco. Call 830/833-4333; www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/blanco.
- 9 **Pedernales River: Pedernales Falls State Park**, 2585 Park Road 6026 in Johnson City. Call 830/868-7304; www.tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/pedernales-falls.



7 GUADALUPE RIVER, INGRAM

Having reached the westernmost point of my trip, I drove back northeast across Real and Kerr counties to Ingram and the Guadalupe River. The route climbed sharp bluffs carpeted in juniper, crossed big-sky savannas splashed with yellow huisache daisies, and then descended to the forested Guadalupe River valley.

The Guadalupe stretches at least 100 yards wide at the Ingram Dam, which has a sidewalk on top that's popular for sunbathing. On the upstream side of the dam, swimmers bob in deep water while minnows nibble their toes. On the opposite side, water pours over an angled spillway; algae and the rushing water combine to create a 45-foot slide to the river below.

I hadn't slid down the Ingram Dam since I was a teenager, but the slide and splash into the river were as thrilling as ever. Climbing back up onto the slippery spillway, however, was harder than I remember.

Back on top of the dam, I was chatting with a local when we saw splashing in the shallows near the bank below the spillway. We looked closer. A water moccasin had its jaws locked on a bird and was thrashing back and forth to subdue it. After about 10 seconds of struggle, the stubby snake pulled the bird's body into a dark crevice in a pile of boulders lining the bank. Time to move on.

S BLANCO RIVER, BLANCO

The 70-foot-long picnic table at Blanco State Park offered a relaxing spot to eat the chicken-salad sandwich I had picked up at the Clear River café in Fredericksburg. The Civilian Conservation Corps built the concrete table in 1933, placing it on an oak-shaded bank of the Blanco.

The CCC also built the park's main swimming area, including a dam and an adjacent swimming pool that's continually refreshed by water pouring downstream (unless the river is low).

Though it was about 7 p.m. and the sun's lateral beams cast lanky shadows over the river, tireless children formed a loop as they jumped from the dam into the swimming hole, climbed a ladder back up to the dam, and jumped again—over and over and over.

I wonder if the CCC boys ever could have imagined the generations of Texans their creations would entertain?



On the Guadalupe River, daredevils slide down the Ingram Dam on foot; a cabin overlooking the Blanco River at Blanco State Park; sunset over the Pedernales River at Pedernales Falls State Park.

9 PEDERNALES RIVER, PEDERNALES FALLS STATE PARK

Hiking down the western side of the river valley at Pedernales Falls State Park, I watched the shadow of dusk advance up the opposite hill. The day's final sheets of light retreated to the ridge top of oak and juniper trees like warriors making a final stand. I made it just in time to jump in the Pedernales before sunset.

Floating on my back, I listened to the rattles and clicks of cicadas and bullfrogs. I turned my eyes skyward as the sun's final rays grazed puffy cumulus clouds. The clouds looked like marshmallows ignited by a campfire, blazing from white to orange, red, purple, and gray.

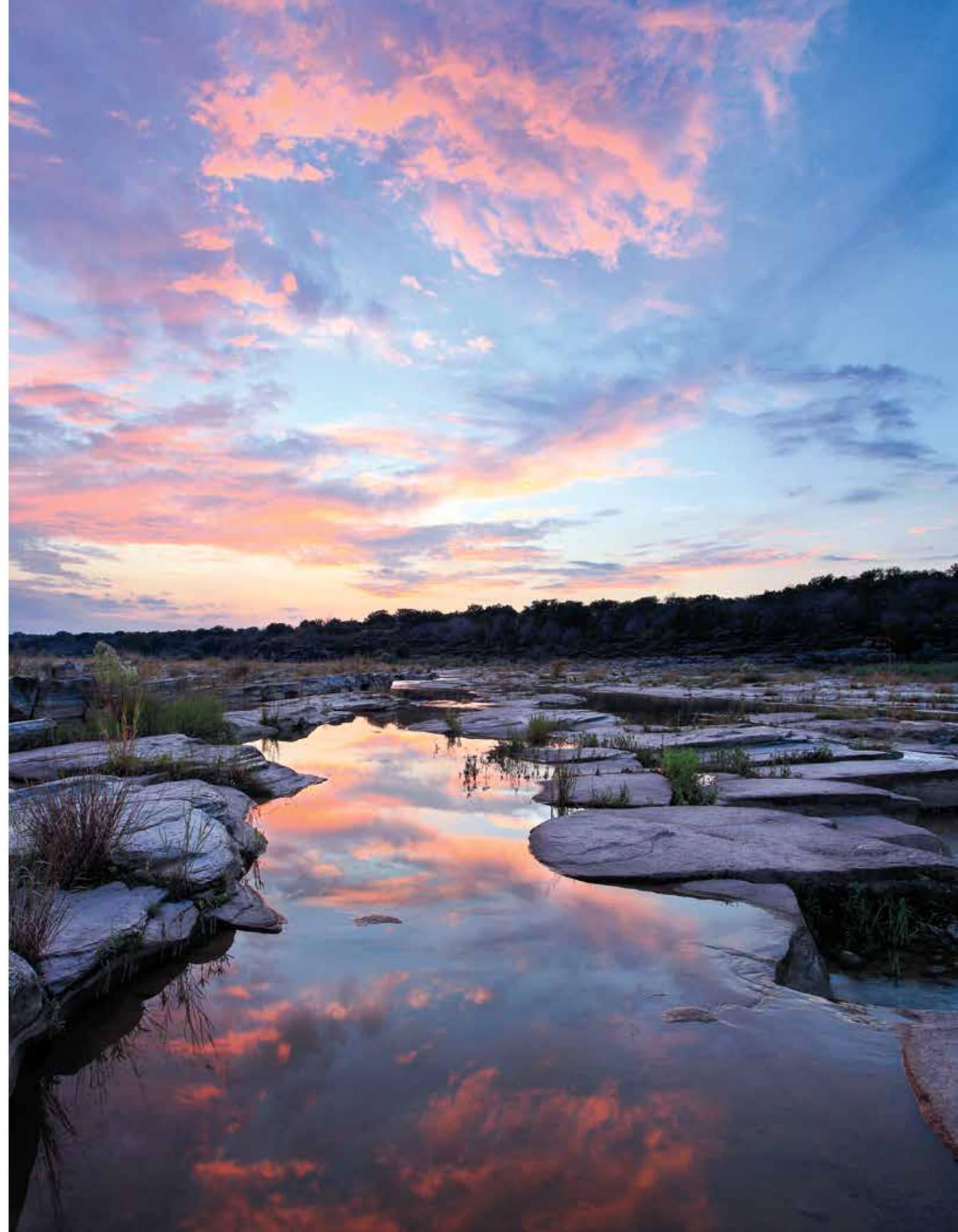
By the time I got back home to Austin, I had driven 370 miles over 16 hours, crossing nine rivers (some of them multiple times), and countless creeks.

"What's the point?" a friend asked me later, suggesting that she would prefer a more leisurely trip than a nine-river day.

Fair question. The point was to bask in the bounty of the Texas Hill Country's rivers and make the most of the year's longest day. Next time, maybe I'll swim in one river a day for nine days, or better yet, spend nine days at each of the nine rivers.

When it comes to swimming in a spring-fed Hill Country river, you really can't go wrong. 🐾

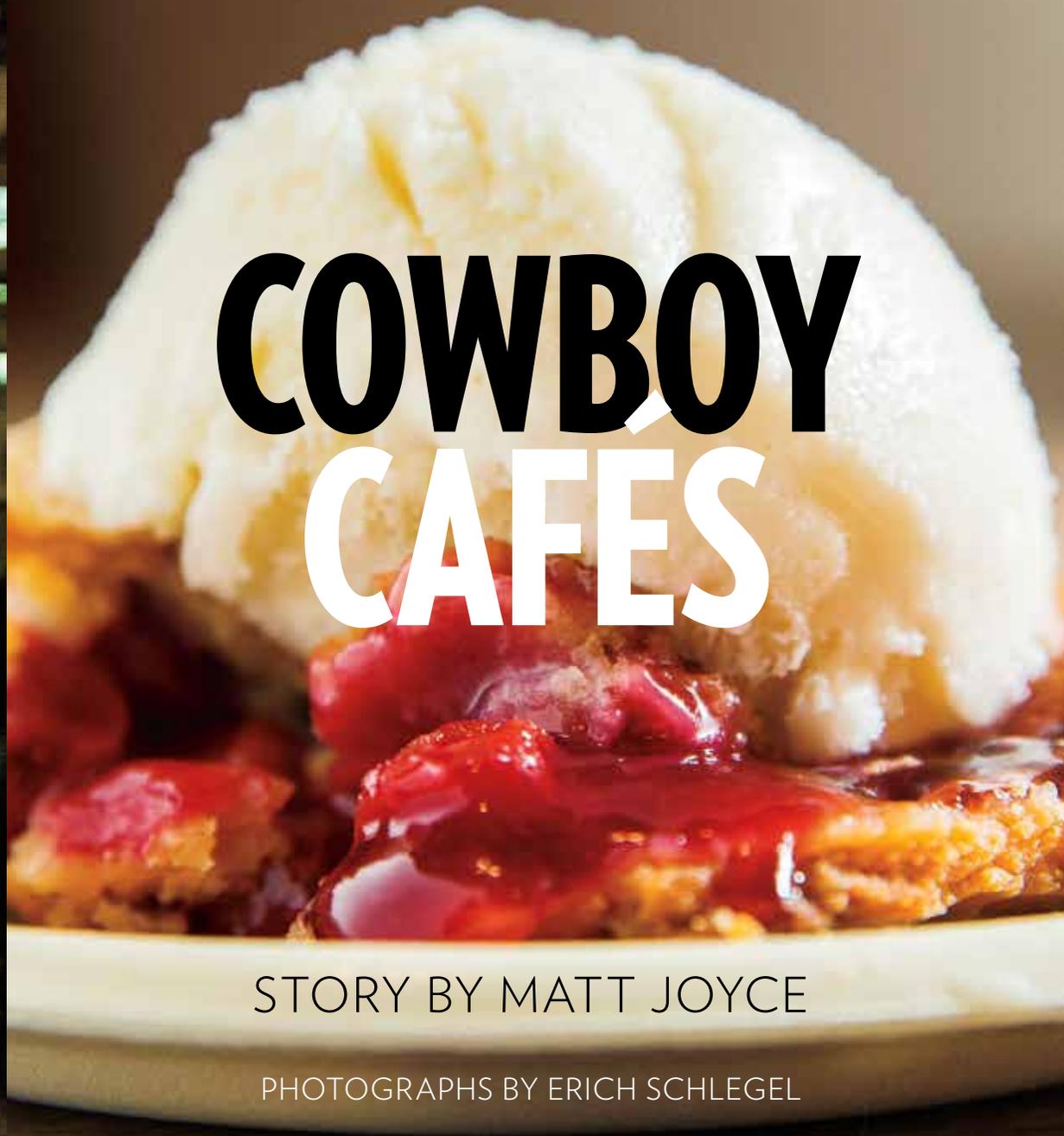
TH Associate Editor Matt Joyce is brainstorming adventures for the 2017 summer solstice. Share your ideas online in this story's comments section at texashighways.com.





GAB AND GRUB AT
TEXAS' STOCKYARD CAFÉS

COWBOY CAFÉS



STORY BY MATT JOYCE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICH SCHLEGEL

WHEN SITTING IN, A STOCKYARD CAFÉ, SURROUNDED BY WEATHERED CATTLEMEN IN SWEAT-STAINED STETSONS AND BUSY WAITRESSES BALANCING PLATES OF CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK AND POTS OF HOT COFFEE, IT'S WORTH OPENING YOUR EARS TO ABSORB A FEW LOCAL TALES.

Opener: Cowboy Terry Huddleston at the Anderson County Livestock Auction in Elkhart; cherry pie with vanilla ice cream at the Stockman's in San Angelo. This page, clockwise: Waitress Joyce Gregory in West; the Cattle Barn in Elkhart; Amarillo Stockyards Café; chicken-fried steak in Amarillo.



Like the story about an agitated cow that chased a Piney Woods rancher into a pond, where he waited in the stagnant water until the cow lost interest. Or the yarn about a woman from the plains who grew so frustrated with her husband's goats that she sold the small herd to a neighbor and reported them stolen—until investigators started asking questions.

Inevitably, the café discourse circles around to the range, weather, and family, then branches off again as new arrivals amble in to take a seat among the crowd, patting backs and shaking hands along the way.

There are about 100 auction barns scattered across Texas where buyers and sellers meet weekly to trade livestock—mostly cattle, but also sheep, goats, horses, and pigs. With auctions sometimes lasting all day and into the night, sale barns often house a restaurant or concession stand to feed their employees and customers.



Most stockyard cafés open only on sale days, typically once a week, but a handful around the state open daily and cater to the general public too. For travelers passing through town, stockyard cafés offer a comforting stop for downhome cooking, a chance to rub elbows with local characters, and a glimpse of the agricultural roots so deeply entwined with Texas heritage.

"In your agriculture communities, the café at a sale barn is the hub, a center for livestock men and ranchers and agriculture people to sit around and converse back and forth and see what's going on in the market," says J.R. Hudson, a Texas Animal Health

Commission inspector and a regular presence at Producers Livestock Auction Co. in San Angelo, which hosts the largest sheep and goat sale in the country. "It's an important part of the community."

Farmers and ranchers have long traveled to town to buy and sell livestock, but as beef became big business in the 19th century, ranchers started trailing their herds to regional stockyards and railheads in places like Fort Worth and Kansas City. Meatpacking plants developed around the stockyards, where buyers purchased full-grown cattle for slaughter. The cattle business shifted in the 1950s and

FOR TRAVELERS PASSING THROUGH TOWN, STOCKYARD CAFÉS OFFER A COMFORTING STOP FOR DOWNHOME COOKING, A CHANCE TO RUB ELBOWS WITH LOCAL CHARACTERS, AND A GLIMPSE OF THE AGRICULTURAL ROOTS SO DEEPLY ENTWINED WITH TEXAS HERITAGE.

MEALS CONSUMED WHILE RESEARCHING THIS STORY

To get a taste of Texas' stockyard cafés, I drove 1,500 miles over five days to visit livestock auctions in Amarillo, San Angelo, Elkhart, and West. I would have loved to stay on the road to make my way

across the state, diner by diner. But reality intervened.

There are sure to be many more down-home meals to be eaten at stockyard cafés like the Cow Palace in Gonzales, AJ's Café in

Alice, Grattons Cajun Kitchen in Karnes City, Circle M Barbecue in Eastland, and Cow Talk Steakhouse in Navasota.

Still, I managed to pick up a few extra pounds along the way:

AMARILLO STOCKYARDS CAFÉ

- Ham steak with two eggs, hash browns, and toast
- Chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes, Texas toast, and salad

STOCKMAN'S RESTAURANT, SAN ANGELO

- Western omelet with hash browns and toast
- Lamb chops with cornbread, black-eyed peas, rolls, corn nuggets, and cherry pie with homemade vanilla ice cream

CATTLE BARN RESTAURANT, ELKHART

- Biscuits and gravy with two eggs
- Hamburger steak with green beans, pinto beans, corn bread, and "crack" cake

STOCKYARD CAFE, WEST

- Eight-ounce rib-eye steak, two eggs, hash browns, and toast
- Chicken-salad sandwich with french fries

—Matt Joyce



'60s with the development of the feedlot industry in places like the Texas Panhandle. It became standard for ranchers to sell their calves to feedlots, which would then fatten the calves and sell them to slaughterhouses. Local auction barns developed as venues for ranchers to sell their calves. Today, about 80 percent of Texas cattle are sold through auction markets, says David Anderson, a professor and extension economist with Texas A&M University.

"The auction is a central location for buyers and sellers to come together, and you have a competitive bidding auction for the ranchers' calves," Anderson says. "It really serves a pretty vital function. If we used a modern term, we'd call them aggregators."

The players in this part of the cattle business fuel up in stockyard cafés—family ranchers, buyers representing feedlots and other ranchers, truck drivers, veterinarians, cowboys, stable hands, and brand inspectors. Judging by the café menus, these folks like

country cooking—hearty bacon-and-egg breakfasts, rib-eye steaks, pork chops, hamburgers, potatoes, chicken and dumplings, pot roast, fried catfish, and such. Ask the cook at any of these restaurants what their most popular dish is and one answer prevails: chicken-fried steak. (By the way, be-

ASK THE COOK AT ANY OF THESE RESTAURANTS WHAT THEIR MOST POPULAR DISH IS AND ONE ANSWER PREVAILS: CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK.

cause the cafés order their meat from food distributors, there's not necessarily a direct link between the animals sold at auction and the meat served in the restaurant across the hall.)

Juan Leal learned how to cook on the job at the Stockman's Restaurant at the San Angelo sale barn. He started as a 17-year-old dishwasher 24 years

ago and now helps run the place. "We all know everything about each other," Leal says, pointing around the restaurant and naming the diners at each table. "You get to sit down and visit with them. We get to know all about them, their kids, where they work, where they retired from."

Charlie Blaneck, who owns the Stockman's Restaurant, also owns the Dun Bar Restaurant, located about a mile away, a diner that his father opened 58 years ago. So what's the difference between running a stockyard restaurant and a regular restaurant?

"Down at the Dun Bar, everybody wants to buy everybody's lunch," Blaneck says. "It may be the same people, but up here, it'll all be separate tickets. They don't want to show any weakness. It's all business, you know. If they can buy something for a couple of pennies cheaper a pound, well, they get it done."

Speaking of business, the stockyard cafes also serve as informal sideline markets for cattlemen and



Clockwise from top left: Cattle dealer Lawson Alford at the Amarillo Livestock Auction; sorting cattle in Amarillo; mealtime at the West Stockyard Cafe; moving stock in West.





buyers looking to fill orders. “A lot of phone calls are made right here. It’s kind of like a golf course for a different kind of business,” notes Hudson, who arrives early on sale days to inspect incoming animals for diseases and then eats breakfast at the Stockman’s with a copy of the *San Angelo Standard-Times*.

Of course most of the trading takes place at the auctions, which are held in small arenas with bleachers, a dirt-floored ring for displaying animals (sold by the head or pound), and an auction block above the ring where the auctioneer directs the proceedings. Hardworking yard hands funnel the animals from outdoor pens through chutes, where some are weighed, and then herd them into the ring. The auctioneer announces a starting figure and rolls into that familiar continuous auction patter as he tries to escalate the price among the buyers, who motion subtle hand signals to make bids.

At mealtimes, café waitresses filter through the crowd to take orders and deliver plates to buyers who don’t want to miss a moment of the bidding. The auctions are open to anybody to observe, and visitors can also head outside to explore the catwalks that extend over the livestock holding pens.

Few people know their way around

an auction barn as well as Lawson Alford, 75, a cattle dealer who lives in Turkey and attends three auctions weekly in the Panhandle. On Mondays, you’ll find Alford at the Amarillo Livestock Auction, which opened in 1935 and sits along the railroad tracks in an industrial area of Amarillo’s east side. Alford, whose father worked at the Amarillo stockyard, sold calves here during his high school years.

“The breakfast here is always good: I like the ham,” says Alford, as he

“THERE’S ALWAYS BEEN A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO COME HERE, NOT JUST CATTLE PEOPLE. ... IF THEY’VE GOT GOOD FOOD AND GOOD SERVICE, PEOPLE COME.”

takes a seat at the Amarillo Stockyards Café, located inside the auction building. “There’s always been a group of people who come here, not just cattle people. It’s bankers, insurance people, salesmen, truckers. If they’ve got good food and good service, people come.”

Missy Treadway has run the Amarillo Stockyards Café since 2013, and she worked for the restaurant when her mother owned it from 1990 to 2002. Photos on the café walls reflect

the cattle-ranching roots of Treadway’s family: a sepia-toned picture of her grandparents and their cabin on the rim of Palo Duro Canyon, and images of pastoral scenes from family members’ ranches.

“This is all we have done our entire lives,” Treadway says.

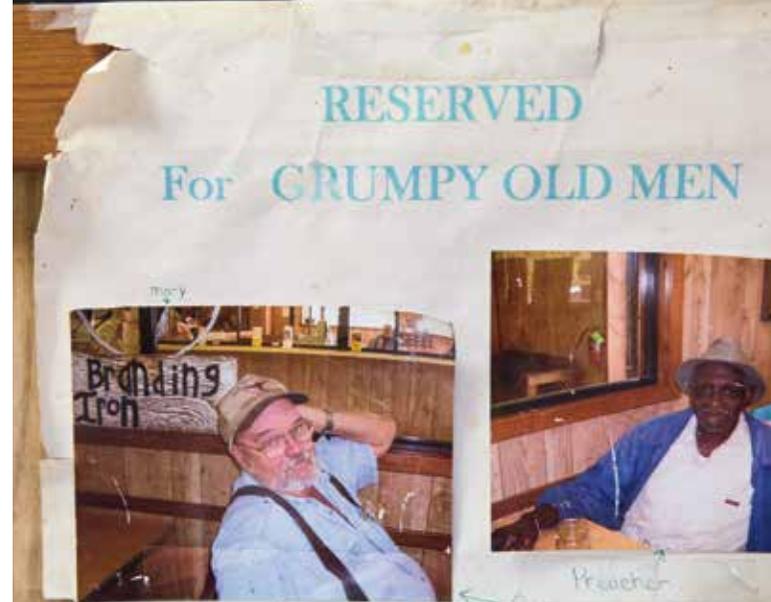
Along those lines, neither Treadway nor her late mother tinkered much with the café menus they inherited. “It’s basically been the same since there’s been a restaurant here,” she says. “We keep the basics because that’s what people are looking for—the chicken-fried steak, the rib-eyes.”

The stockyard cafés that stay open throughout the week rely largely on customers who aren’t in the livestock business. Set against a backdrop of a dense East Texas forest, the Cattle Barn Restaurant at the Anderson County Livestock Auction in Elkhart draws plenty of regulars who are more interested in the restaurant’s daily buffet specials than buying or selling cows. In a back corner of the wood-paneled dining room, Gary Wynne hangs out at a table labeled with a sign reading “Reserved for grumpy old men.”

Wynne has been visiting the Cattle Barn almost daily since he retired from running his own barbecue joint in 2006. At one point, he started helping out when the restaurant’s two employees got busy. Now he pitches in regularly, folding napkins, brewing tea, and wiping down tables. He takes his payment in meals, which the restaurant serves buffet-style. Particularly popular are chicken-fried steak Wednesdays and fried catfish Fridays.

“It’s mainly to get away from the house, you know,” says Wynne, who wears a baseball cap from one of his former businesses, Handyman & Honey-Dos. “If I stay at the house all the time, I get depressed. So I come here to help out and talk to my friends.”

Friends and family also run deep in West, where the red-and-tan West Auction Inc. building sits on a rise along Interstate 35, a familiar sight



Clockwise from top left: In Elkhart, the table for Gary Wynne and his late friend Calvin Carter, aka “preacher;” lunch at the auction in San Angelo; cook Juan Leal at the Stockman’s in San Angelo; cattle sale at West Auction Inc.

for drivers. Along with cattle auction customers, the West Stockyard Cafe is popular with truckers because of its interstate access and large parking lot. “One trucker told me it’s the best place to stop between the Rio Grande and the Red River because you can go downhill both ways from this location,” says Ted Uptmore Sr., who owns the auction barn and the restaurant with his wife, Adele. The Uptmores four sons all contribute to the operation of the auction barn, as do some of their grandchildren.

Inside, the West Stockyard Cafe features a small dining room with an

old-fashioned counter with five stools. A signed photo of Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones duded up in their cowboy gear from *Lonesome Dove* contributes to the Old West atmosphere of the cafe, which sits near the route of the historic Chisholm Trail. The cowboy scene feels most authentic on Thursdays, when cattlemen show up before the start of the cattle auction for lunches of roast beef, shepherd’s pie, and barbecue sausage.

Waitress Joyce Gregory has worked at the West Stockyard Cafe for 17 years, though she only works two days a week now, her free time spent helping

care for her grandchildren. Gregory is all business when it comes to making sure her customers have what they need. And she keeps a close eye on the food that the cooks place in the kitchen window.

“I look at it this way,” she says, “if I’ll eat it, I’ll serve it.”

“In Amarillo I met some tourists from Berlin who came to have this Texana experience firsthand,” says freelance photographer Erich Schlegel. Watch for TH Associate Editor Matt Joyce’s story on Big Bend’s mining history in the November issue.



ESSENTIALS: STOCKYARD CAFÉS

Stockyard cafés typically stay open late on auction days, until the sale is over:

The Amarillo Stockyards Café is at the Amarillo Livestock Auction, 100 S. Manhattan St. Hours: Mon-Sat 6 a.m.-2:30 p.m., and Fri 5-9 p.m. Cattle sale is 11 a.m. Mon. amarillostockyardscafe.com; 806-373-7999.

Stockman’s Restaurant is at the Producers Livestock Auction, 1131 N. Bell St., in San Angelo. Hours: Mon-Fri 6 a.m.-2 p.m. Sheep and goat sale is 9 a.m. Tue. Cattle sale is 9 a.m. Thu. 325-653-3371.

The Cattle Barn Restaurant is at the Anderson County Livestock Auction, at the corner of

US 287 and SH 294, in Elkhart. Hours: Mon-Fri 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Cattle sale is noon Wed. 903-516-2750.

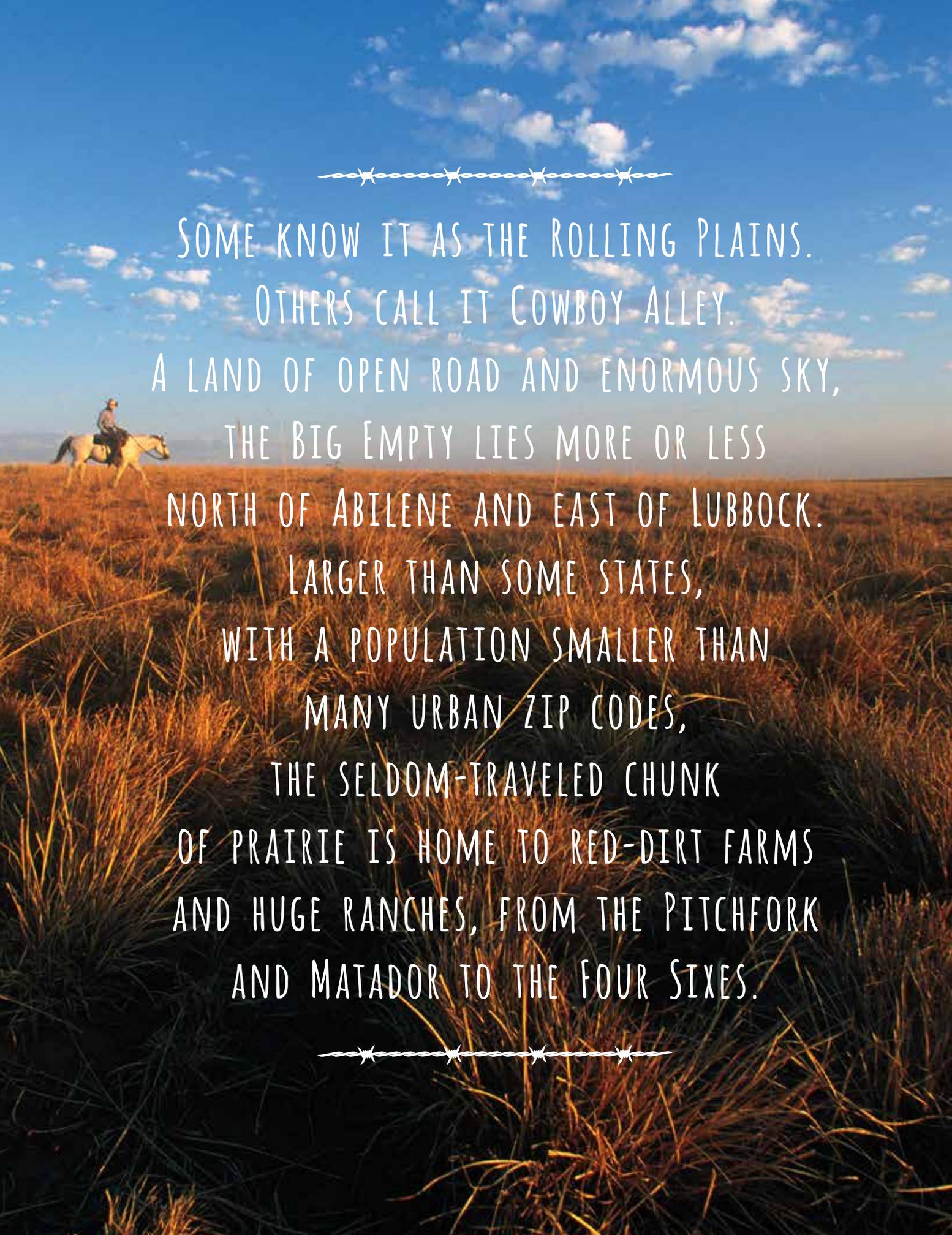
The Stockyard Cafe is at the West Auction, 20645 N. I-35 in West. Hours: Tue-Fri 6 a.m.-1 p.m. Cattle sale is 11:30 a.m. Thu. 254-826-3460.

THE BIG EMPTY

SOLITARY ADVENTURES ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED



BY WES FERGUSON



SOME KNOW IT AS THE ROLLING PLAINS.
OTHERS CALL IT COWBOY ALLEY.
A LAND OF OPEN ROAD AND ENORMOUS SKY,
THE BIG EMPTY LIES MORE OR LESS
NORTH OF ABILENE AND EAST OF LUBBOCK.
LARGER THAN SOME STATES,
WITH A POPULATION SMALLER THAN
MANY URBAN ZIP CODES,
THE SELDOM-TRAVELED CHUNK
OF PRAIRIE IS HOME TO RED-DIRT FARMS
AND HUGE RANCHES, FROM THE PITCHFORK
AND MATADOR TO THE FOUR SIXES.



It's a kind of place you drive through to get somewhere else," says Reed Underwood, a native son who recommends slowing down to have a look around.

Rick Perry is from there. So was Bob Wills, the king of Western Swing. The region stretches between the Western Cross Timbers in the east, to the Caprock Escarpment in the west, and the Red River valley in the north. The Big Empty's southern boundary is harder to define, but it's somewhere north of the similarly named "Big Country" region around Abilene. Though definitive population counts don't exist for the unofficial region, local sources say it's somewhere around 20,000.

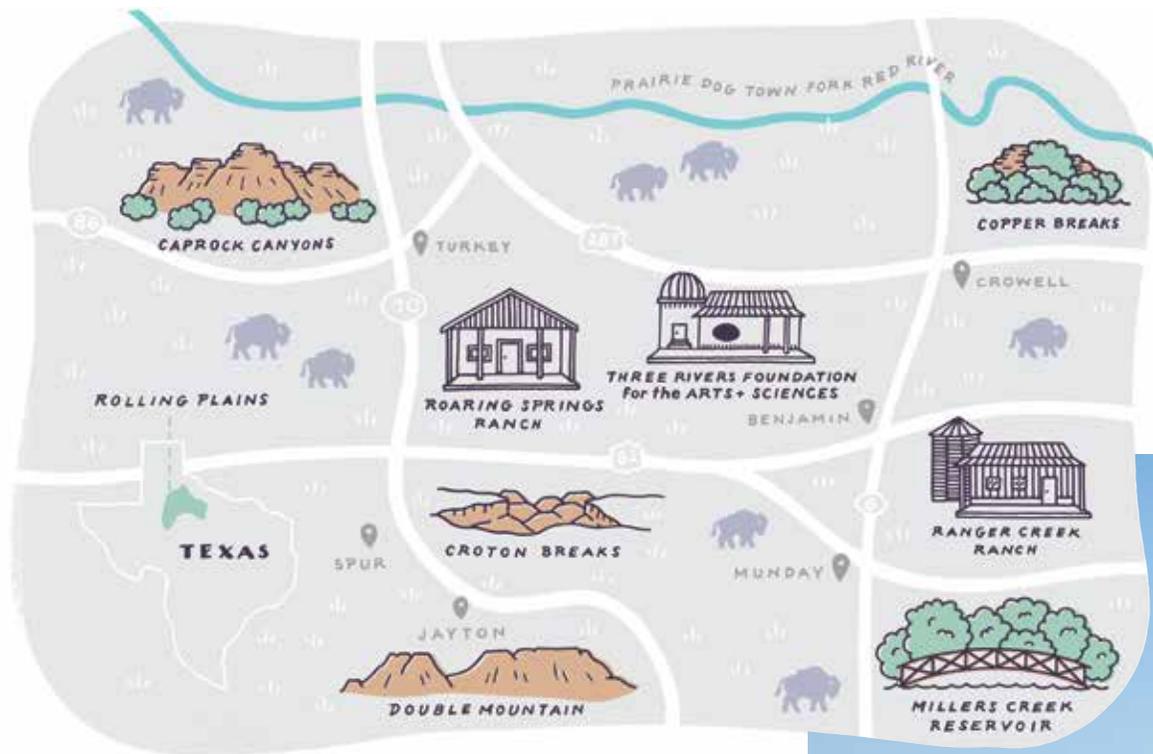
To get there from most urban centers in Texas, drive practically to the Panhandle. When you don't see anything, stop.

I hit the highway in late July, heading west by northwest out of Fort Worth. When the scrub forests of the Cross Timbers fell into my rearview, I ventured like some modern-day pioneer onto the boundless prairie—except that I was burning asphalt at 75 miles per hour where Comanche and bison once roamed.

This was the Big Empty. And, boy, was it empty. I sped past red dirt and green fields, rows of cotton and other crops, nary another car on the road. For a person who grew up in the shade of the Piney Woods, I find few sights quite as thrilling as the immense views of the West. Overhead, the sun shone brightly, but the highway led into the path of a silvery storm cloud that billowed above the horizon. From the solitary cloud, four or

IT FELT ALMOST LUXURIOUS
TO ROLL THE WINDOWS DOWN,
SMELL THE SWEET GRASS,
AND LISTEN TO NOTHING
BUT THE CRUNCH OF GRAVEL,
THE HUM OF CICADAS, AND
THE OCCASIONAL RUMBLE
OVER CATTLE GUARDS.

Opening spread: Caprock Canyons State Park and Trailway lies along the western edge of the Llano Estacado; This spread: A cowboy rides across the open prairie 3 miles west of Benjamin; founders of the town of Matador named it after the Matador Ranch.



Double Mountain, elevation approximately 2,500 feet, lies 13 miles southwest of Aspermont in Stonewall County; Bob Wills' tour bus at his namesake museum in Turkey.

Underwood has moved away from the Big Empty as well, but he is still sorting through the odd feeling of being from a place he believes to be dying.

My first afternoon in the Big Empty, I drove down the quiet highway toward the town of Goree—formerly 640 people, now 208—when a stately brick church caught my eye. Its steeple sprouted out from behind hugely overgrown shrubs. St. John Catholic Church, I later learned, was established in 1908

and served the once-bustling Bomarton community. From 598 residents shortly before World War II, the population plummeted to 15 at the turn of the millennium. In 2010, the U.S. Census didn't even register Bomarton as a place.

Overgrown shrubbery all but obscured the front doors of the church. A handwritten sign nailed to the door read: "This was a house of God and still is." Another note posted to a support beam just

LONG-ABANDONED BARNs AND FARMHOUSES DOTTED THE PRAIRIE, AS DID THE REMAINS OF TINY GHOST TOWNS WHERE FARMERS ONCE CONGREGATED TO DO BUSINESS, ATTEND CHURCH, AND SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO SCHOOL.

five sheets of rain fell on the grassland. The first drops hit my windshield a half-hour later. Within minutes, I'd passed right through.

Long-abandoned barns and farmhouses dotted the prairie, as did the remains of tiny ghost towns where farmers once congregated to do business, attend church, and send their children to school. They reminded me of a conversation with Underwood before my trip. I had reached out to him because he recently completed a master's thesis at the University of North Texas on the Big Empty. A native of O'Brien, population 102, where his father was the six-man football coach, Underwood says the region's population has fallen every decade since 1930. Elsewhere, Texas is growing fast, but the populations of some of the Big Empty's 10 or so counties have shriveled to one quarter the size of their numbers in the heyday of the early- to mid-20th century.

This largely "featureless" region has no buildings taller than two or three stories, according to Underwood. "Rather, its landscapes are by and large testaments to abandonment," he writes in his thesis, going on to describe the "empty storefronts on quiet town squares, overgrown schoolyards made redundant through successive consolidations, tumbledown empty farmhouses melting into the red clay." When the area's high school seniors receive their diplomas, he adds, "most of them keep marching out of town to look for opportunity elsewhere."



inside the empty cathedral seconded the point: “Not Abandoned.”

Moving on to Munday, which at 1,324 people is one of the area’s more sizeable towns, I checked into the American Star Inn, managed by Cindy Patchett. Her husband previously lived in Munday, and the two moved back while their children attended school. “At first the kids hated it,” she said. “Now they won’t leave. They’re raising their own children here.”

And what is there to see and do around here? “The lake,” she answered. “And... the lake.”

That weekend, some of her guests had caught a mess of catfish from nearby Millers Creek

Reservoir. I hadn’t brought my fishing pole, but I did have a pair of swim trunks. About 16 miles east of town, past white rows of enormous wind turbines, the 2,212-acre lake is accessible by a maze of dirt roads through mesquite thickets that lead to free campsites along the bank.

Nobody seemed to be at the reservoir, except for two brothers-in-law named Daniel and Simon who tended a grill while their wives and a son played in the water. They offered me a sausage wrap and a grilled pork chop. Between their broken English and my broken Spanish, I learned Daniel works in the oilfield and Simon is a cotton farmer.

Right: A lightning storm in King County, off US 82; Below: Visitors to Caprock Canyons may spy members of the Official Texas State Bison Herd.



A breeze rippled across the blue lake. Overhead, armadas of stratocumulus marched past swirls of cirrus. The reservoir had only recently filled to capacity after the most recent drought. “Two years ago, the lake was dry,” Simon said. “The water was just 1 foot deep.”

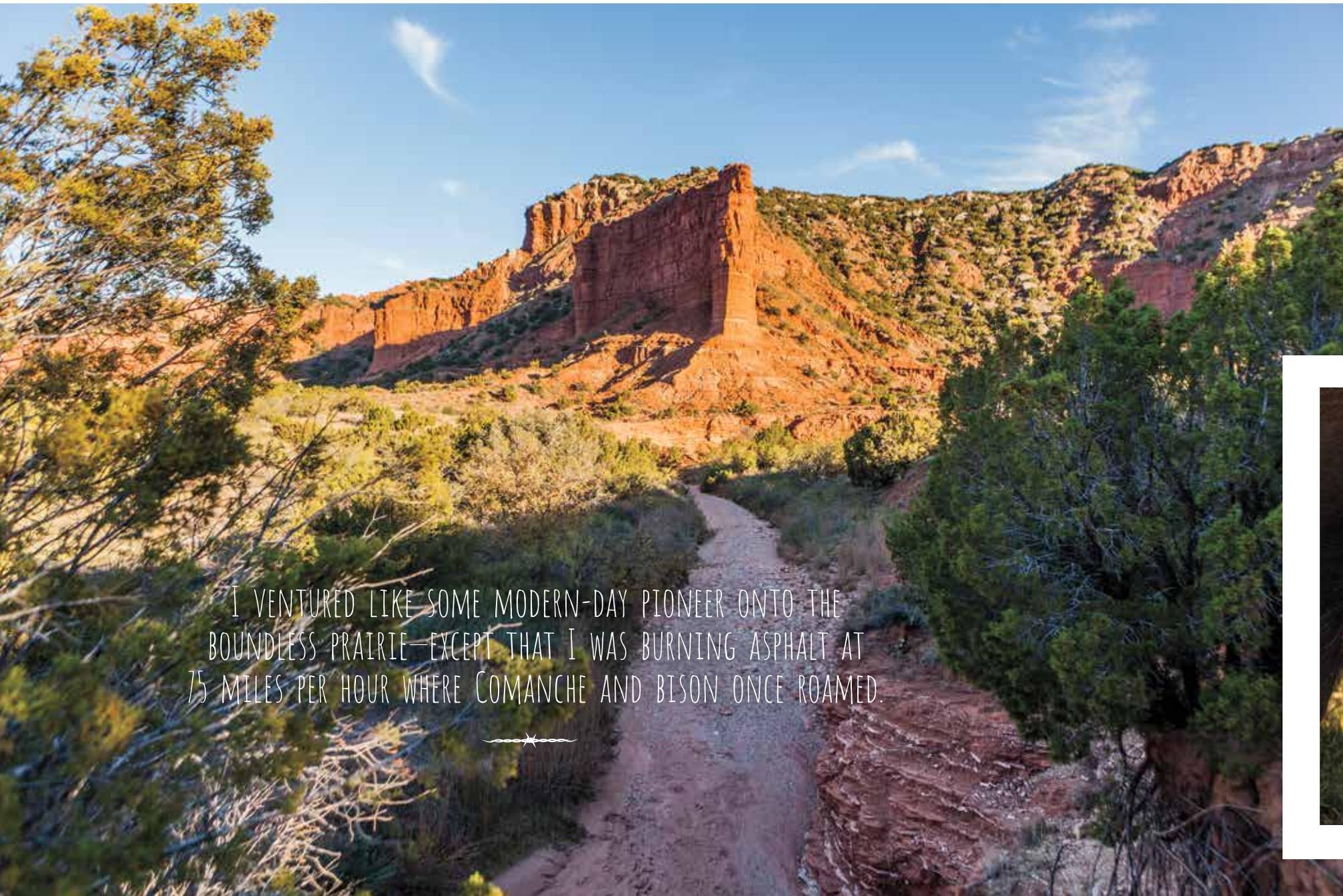
Sleek, black cows lowed from a safe distance as I eased into the bracingly cool water. Floating on my back, I couldn’t tell which drifted faster: the clouds or me. Later, as the sun set, strobes of lightning burst far beyond the lake’s eastern shore.

In the morning, I would begin my search for a dead man.



THE LATE AUTHOR AND TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY professor Jim Corder came up with the name for the Big Empty. A genre-defying scholar of postmodern rhetoric, Corder first used the term in print in his memoir *Lost in West Texas*, published in 1988 when he was 59. Corder grew up in Jayton, an hour’s drive west of Munday and 90 miles east of Lubbock. “The territory I love out there is not much chronicled,” he writes in *Lost in West Texas*, going on to lovingly describe geographic features of the Big Empty like Double Mountain, “blue above the broken plains surrounding them,” and the Croton Breaks, a “great empty space” of rugged badlands eroded into sharp washes. “The earth opens itself up in layers there,” he writes, “and each rock that falls after an age’s pushing from the side of a gully reveals another surprise.”

As I drove past Double Mountain, its humps seemed less blue than red and green, blotched white by gypsum, a salty mineral common to the region. To my frustration, I couldn’t catch a glimpse of the Croton Breaks from the flat prairie highway connecting Jayton and Spur. However, my map revealed



I VENTURED LIKE SOME MODERN-DAY PIONEER ONTO THE BOUNDLESS PRAIRIE—EXCEPT THAT I WAS BURNING ASPHALT AT 75 MILES PER HOUR WHERE COMANCHE AND BISON ONCE ROAMED.





Clockwise from left: Croton Breaks' badlands topography encompasses 250 square miles below the escarpment of the Llano Estacado; the Dairy Bar in Crowell serves up old-fashioned burgers; Copper Breaks State Park covers nearly 1,900 acres in Hardeman County, 9 miles north of Crowell.



Linda Roy, the sibling on duty the week I stopped by. “There wasn’t even a roof.” Roy and her sisters beautifully restored and elegantly furnished the brick building. The Texas lawmen-themed guest room tempted me but sunset was still a few hours away, so I drove 45 miles to Caprock Canyons State Park and Trailway.

That night, the Caprock’s dramatic bluffs glowed red as the sun fell behind them. In the morning, the park’s herd of shaggy American bison frolicked, snorted, and head-butted one another in the cool air as it blew across the badlands.

I had come to the western edge of the Big Empty, at the Caprock Escarpment. Instead of continuing up the scarp and onto the High Plains, I turned back. The road led to the town of Turkey, which is home to not only the historic Hotel Turkey but also an annual festival in April celebrating hometown legend Bob Wills, complete with live Western Swing music and lawnmower races.



FARTHER EAST, DURING A STOP AT COPPER BREAKS STATE PARK the next morning, longtime interpretive ranger Carl Hopper encouraged me to keep an eye out for the park’s namesake mineral. “The park is plumb full of copper,” he says. Sure



evidence of the breaks via a network of riotously squiggly roads immediately to the east.

The map’s little county roads seemed to pass a series of canyons with evocative names like Dark and Getaway. I had a full tank of gas, and nobody was waiting for me. Why not turn off the main highway and get lost for a while? Life is normally so busy. It felt almost luxurious to roll the windows down, smell the sweet grass, and listen to nothing but the crunch of gravel, the hum of cicadas, and the occasional rumble over cattle guards. A particularly high overlook revealed miles of rugged landscape where red canyons gashed the low green hills. The road dropped dramatically into country so eroded that it rivaled the desert floors of the Big Bend, practically halfway across Texas, for its rough beauty.

The path rose and fell as it looped around sharp turns through gullies and washes. I could have spent the day exploring these backroads, but they eventually became too rough for my crossover SUV, and so I turned around. Once when Corder was asked where he hoped to end up when he died, he responded that he would just as soon go to the Croton Breaks. As I drove out of the badlands, Corder’s wish seemed to make sense.

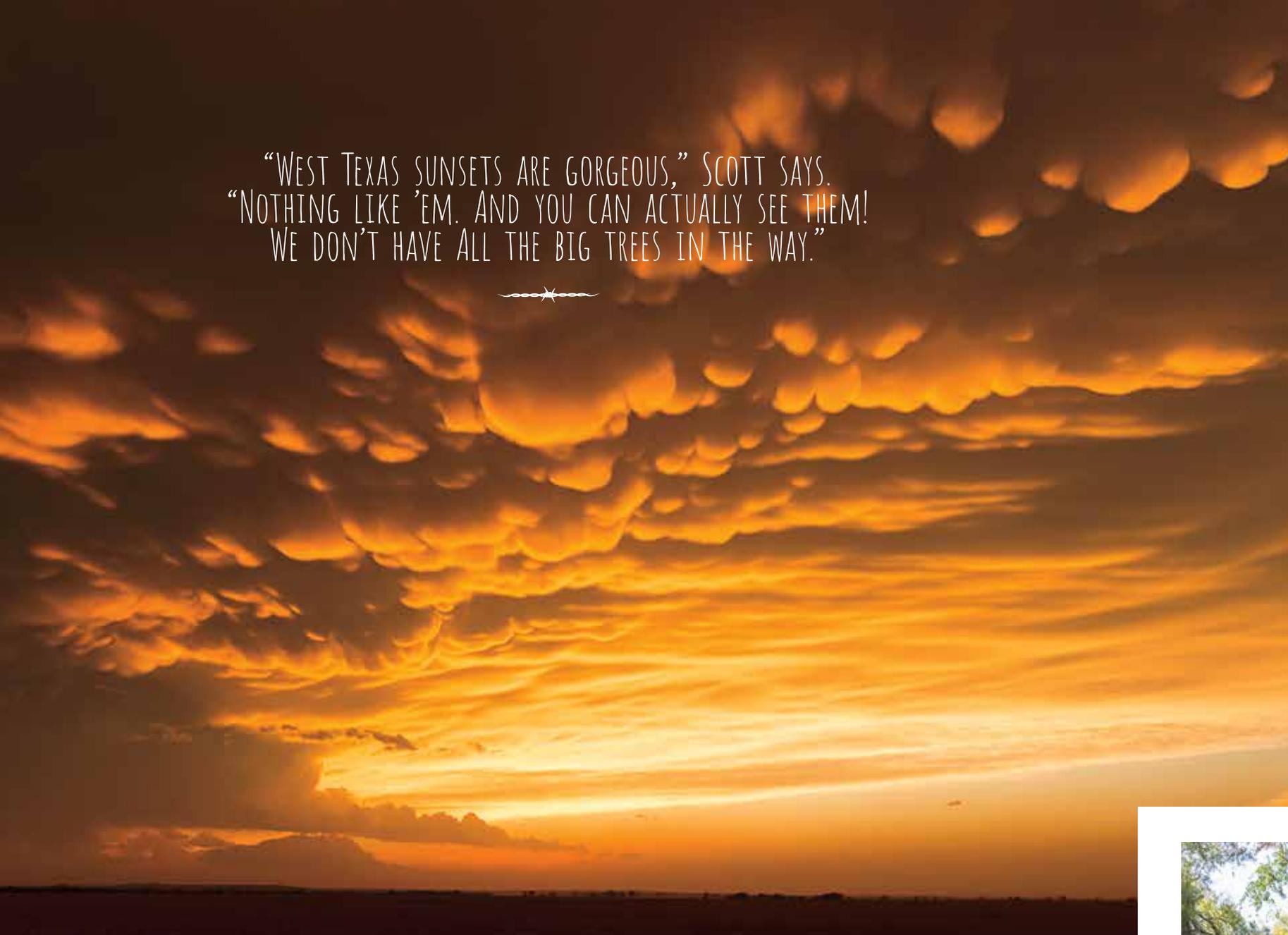
For those who prefer travel on pavement, you can also glimpse the Croton Breaks from the freeway just east of Dickens. The town is a half-hour’s drive north of Jayton and 20 miles south of the Roaring Springs Ranch Club, once a favorite camping spot of the Comanche. Now a private, member-owned club, Roaring Springs allows members to camp, fish, ride ATVs, and cool off where a spring-fed waterfall supplies a gloriously chilly, 3-acre swimming pool.

Continuing north through quiet country from Roaring Springs, I came to the town of Matador, named for the legendary ranch. Here, three sisters have reopened a 1914-era hotel called the Hotel Matador. “When we got it, the place was junked,” says

“THE EARTH OPENS ITSELF UP IN LAYERS THERE,” HE WRITES, “AND EACH ROCK THAT FALLS AFTER AN AGE’S PUSHING FROM THE SIDE OF A GULLY REVEALS ANOTHER SURPRISE.”



“WEST TEXAS SUNSETS ARE GORGEOUS,” SCOTT SAYS.
 “NOTHING LIKE ’EM. AND YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE THEM!
 WE DON’T HAVE ALL THE BIG TREES IN THE WAY.”



enough, the greenish patina of oxidized copper seemed to paint many of the loose rocks on a trail overlooking the park lake.

Copper Breaks was the first state park in Texas to earn an international dark sky rating, Hopper says, claiming that his night skies are darker than those found at the McDonald Observatory in the Davis Mountains. Taking advantage of the absence of light pollution, the nearby Three Rivers Foundation for the Arts and Sciences offers star parties once a month at its Comanche Springs Astronomy Campus west of Crowell.

After hiking the Copper Breaks trail, I had worked up an appetite. Because so few people live in the Big Empty, restaurant options are limited. Luckily, I came across the Dairy Bar in Crowell. Jeff Christopher and his wife, Karen Christopher, have

owned the unassuming roadside joint for 17 years. While they have no idea how old it is, they do know it was moved to its current location in the early 1960s. The Dairy Bar’s burger hit the spot. “They aren’t healthy,” Jeff says. “A good, old-fashioned greasy burger is what I do.”

The following morning, in the Vera community 40 miles southeast of Crowell, Ranell Scott and I loaded into her white pickup truck and drove across land that has been in her family for more than 100 years. Scott runs Ranger Creek Ranch, a cattle operation and hunting lodge with several guest houses.

When Scott stopped to open a metal gate, two jackrabbits fell in with a muster of turkeys and bounded across an open field. A family of wild hogs rooted nearby. Quail waddled in front of Scott’s truck, and roadrunners sprinted among the

Clockwise from left: Mammatus clouds reflect the setting sun after a storm passes over Knox County; a wild boar crosses the highway west of Benjamin; the Roaring Springs Ranch Club offers members a place to camp and swim.



mesquite. The ranch is also on the migration path of Monarch butterflies, she says.

As Scott drove, it became apparent that we had reached the edge of a small plateau. Rolling ranchland spread for miles and miles. Scott pointed out the property line she shares with the approximately 535,000-acre Waggoner Ranch, the largest ranch under one fence in Texas. The view would have been majestic right before twilight.

“West Texas sunsets are gorgeous,” Scott says. “Nothing like ’em. And you can actually see them! We don’t have all the big trees in the way as in other parts of Texas.”

The Big Empty seemed anything but empty. So why do so few people know about it?

Wyman Meinzer has an idea. Raised a cowboy on a Big Empty ranch, he spent a few years trapping furs in the area and is now the official photographer of the state of Texas. He has taken photographs throughout the state, but his primary subject—his life’s work—is documenting the Big Empty. He captures images of cowboys and critters, scalded river breaks, and endless sunrises.

“This is a land that you have to become a participant in,” he says. “It’s not going to jump up and hit you in the face. You have to become part of it. You have to stop, look and see, and imagine.”

Fifty miles southwest of Meinzer’s home in Benjamin, Double Mountain rises from the broken prairie.

On cold and still mornings, Meinzer says he can see the Doubles in the distance. Side by side, they seem to float in the sky. And there’s a road, little traveled, leading toward them.

For visitor information, call Caprock Canyons State Park at 806-455-1492; and Copper Breaks State Park at 940-839-4331. For reservations, call American Star Inn at 940-422-5542; Roaring Springs Ranch Club at 806-348-7292; and Hotel Matador at 806-347-2939. 🐾

Kilgore native Wes Ferguson is author of *The Blanco River* and *Running the River: Secrets of the Sabine*.