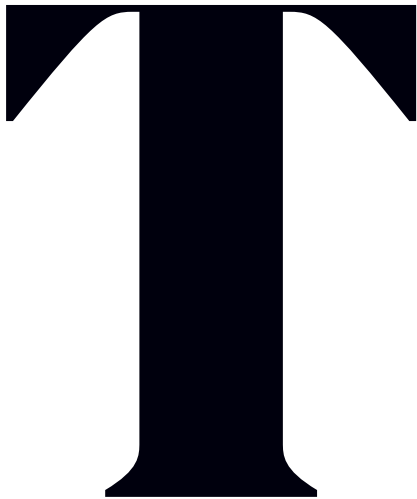




Have Board, Will Travel

Dropping in at the largest public skate park in the country

By Bret Anthony Johnston



I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN SOUTH TEXAS. I grew up catching snakes, eating Whataburger, and listening to Waylon, Willie, and the boys. Had I not snuck into a matinee of *Back to the Future*, there's a mighty fine chance I would have grown up to be a large-animal veterinarian. But seeing Marty McFly hold onto a Jeep's bumper while riding his skateboard awoke a profound and unprecedented longing, the inchoate sense that my life was about to open up. Upon leaving the theater, I sold my bicycle to a neighbor kid and used the money to buy my first skateboard. Riding behind cars—technically called “skitching” (skate + hitching)—was less thrilling than I'd imagined, but the simple feeling of four urethane wheels rolling under my feet was liberating. From my first ride, I couldn't get enough. When I'm skating, the world and all of its trendy distractions, digital diversions, and petty complications fall away. There's a Zen-like liberation that comes with the intense focus that skating requires, a disconnecting that can feel, forgive me, wholly transcendent. Skateboarding is neither sport nor art. It's a path, a perspective, and a practice—a habit of being.

But in the 1980s, it wasn't exactly super cool being a skater in Texas. Read: Any thinking person would opt for a ghastly case of halitosis. Who despised me most—teachers or cheerleaders, security guards or business owners, jocks or kickers—depended on the day. I still listened to Willie and Waylon, but I was also getting into punk, hip-hop, and hardcore, genres that weren't in heavy rotation on Corpus Christi's few radio stations. I wore baseball caps backward and clothes five sizes too big. My skate buddies and I stole plywood (often campaign billboards) to build janky ramps, and we

The drive from Austin to Houston is marked by undulant pastures, vibrant swaths of wildflowers, and if you know where to look, a scattering of public skate parks. Pierce Park in Taylor is a surreal moonscape not unlike a cement-covered golf course. In Rockdale, the skate park features a fiberglass disc, like a giant blue tea saucer, rumored to have been salvaged from a defunct wave pool in San Marcos. Brenham is home to Fireman's Park, a set of converted tennis courts anchored by prefabricated ramps and rails. The proliferation of these parks—let alone that they were built with public funds—shows how drastically the Lone Star State's relationship with skateboarding has changed in the last couple of decades. But the biggest change, and I do mean biggest, is near Spring, south of the Woodlands, off Interstate 45. There resides the North Houston Skate Park, a \$6.5 million behemoth that reigns as the largest public skate park in the country. That's where I'm heading. In many ways, I've been on this road for over 30 years, since I was 14 and just learning to skate.

trespassed with wild abandon when we heard tell of a drained pool. Once, when we were skating behind a shopping center, an overheated rent-a-cop pulled his sidearm on us. Another time, a crew of meatheads—I've always deemed them football players, but lack categorical evidence—tried to mow us down with their jacked-up Ford.

There's also the obvious physical peril that accompanies skateboarding. I've tried sliding down handrails only to lose my board and fail to catch myself before doing the splits on the bannister. I've fallen from 12-foot-tall ramps straight onto my hip. And my shoulder. And my head. I can remember three concussions. I've broken and nearly severed fingers on my right hand, an injury that required two surgeries and learning to write with my left hand through my sophomore year in high school. My shins are mapped with constellations of scars. My ankles pop when I climb stairs. Since breaking the metatarsals in my foot, the appendage does a half-way decent job of predicting rain.

But the adversity—the risks, the injuries, the scrapes with meatheads and the law—is the cost of skateboarding. I've never viewed it as anything other than a bargain, the steal of a lifetime. Driving to the North Houston Skate Park, I have the heady feeling that I'm on the lam. It's all I can do not to speed.

SKATEBOARDING AND LONG drives have always been linked in my mind. As soon as I got my license, I road-tripped to bigger cities with thriving skate scenes. In the mid-to-late '80s, skateboarding was enjoying an unexpected boom, so entrepreneurs across Texas started opening private skate parks. They rented warehouses, packed them with Masonite-covered ramps, and charged entry fees in hopes of turning a profit or at least offsetting the requisite liability insurance. Dillo Skate Park in Austin had one of the country's first and best spine ramps, effectively two halfpipes pushed together to form a skateable W. All of the ramps at the Skate Park of Houston (not to be confused with the newer North

Houston Skate Park) were steel and fast and intimidating, complete with names like The Ninja and The Hurricane. Up in Dallas, Jeff Phillips, the undisputed king of Texas skateboarding, opened a giant indoor park bearing his name. My buddies and I made those trips countless times in our youth, logging thousands of miles, eating only peanut butter sandwiches so we'd have enough gas money, and pulling over to skate drainage ditches, empty pools, and a certain insurance company's building in San Antonio with gorgeously transitioned planters.

The boom was short-lived, though. Skateboarding had gotten so big that it collapsed under its own weight, with select big companies falling to a ton of small companies that didn't make

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enough money to stay in business. As skateboarding's popularity nose-dived, the cost of liability insurance soared through the warehouse roof. By the early '90s, most skate parks were shuttered: Dillo, the Skate Park of Houston, and Phillips all vanished almost overnight, as did several of the major skateboard companies. Tragically, on Christmas day in 1993, Phillips took his own life. Those of us who wanted to keep pushing went back to skating janky backyard ramps, scouting drained pools, and sliding down shopping center handrails. In my memory, those annoying red-on-white *NO SKATEBOARDING* signs became ubiquitous overnight. The number of short-fused security guards multiplied. We still lit out for skate spots, but it wasn't uncommon to drive for hours only to get

kicked out—or worse—before our wheels even hit the concrete. I never exactly thought about quitting, but with fewer and fewer places to skate, I spent a disorienting amount of time off my board.

DRIVING EAST ON US 290 NOW, en route to the North Houston Skate Park, passing pastures dotted with majestic quarter horses to the north and fields ablaze with sunflowers to the south, I recall those years with mixed emotions. I wasn't skating very often, but I'd started losing myself in literature the way I only ever had while chasing skate tricks. Working to find the right word to ignite a sentence offered almost the same thrill as barging an empty pool before the cops showed up. I went to graduate school in Ohio, then Iowa, and began cobbling together a career as a fiction writer. I taught at universities from California to Massachusetts. I dressed, spoke, and tried to carry myself the way other professors did, lest I be unmasked as a skate punk. One of the first times I dared to write about skateboarding, an esteemed (and world famous and decidedly brilliant) colleague took me aside and said, "I really enjoyed that essay about your misspent youth." She meant it as a compliment, one I still genuinely cherish, but it also stoked that old dissident fire. I mean, how misspent could my youth have been? I taught at the same (ultra-prestigious) university she did. After that, I ditched my wingtips for Vans and started teaching in T-shirts instead of blazers. I also started skating again. Like, a lot.

Something else had changed while I was in grad school: Cities started allocating public space for skate parks. City councils had seen the positive impact skate parks had. For one, they attracted all of the skaters to one area and thus cut down on cops being dispatched to different locations to run them off. Many of the parks, especially early on, were laughably bad and poorly constructed. They'd been designed by low-bid contractors who had never stepped on a board. Think: A golf course laid out by someone who had, at best, read a logline for

Caddyshack. But the parks were free, permanent, and within a short drive. Each year brought more of them, and each one improved on the last. Locales as diverse as inner-city Detroit, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, and the sleepy Colorado community of Milliken (population just over 7,000) suddenly had unlimited access to totally legit and wholly legal skate terrain. In California alone, there are almost 300 skate parks. Texas is trailing with just over 200 parks, but when one of those is the 2-acre oasis in North Houston, the score seems about even. Even if there's an In-N-Out on every corner, I'll still go out of my way for a Whataburger. Wouldn't you?

THE NORTH HOUSTON SKATE PARK opened a little more than five years ago, the product of local high school students voting unanimously to add a place to skate in their community. Since then, skaters have made pilgrimages from around the world. Earlier this year, Tony Hawk, the world's most famous and important skateboarder, showed up unannounced and skated quietly among the locals. The diversity of terrain is stunning, almost overwhelmingly so. It's entirely possible to fixate on one perfect corner before ever thinking to explore the rest. The park offers versions of urban obstacles—stair sets, handrails, benches, ledges, and curbs—as well as flawless ramps and bowls, ranging from 2 to 15 feet tall. A mellow snake run winds throughout, and the river-rock-smooth surfaces flow like the Guadalupe across 2 outdoor acres.

The piece-de-skate-resistance is a massive bowl, like an empty pool, that commands the north end of the property. Four connected sections expand out from a 360-degree full-pipe (imagine one of those vomit-inducing roller coaster loops) at the center of the bowl. Skating the full-pipe, which has a diameter of 20 feet, feels akin to surfing and getting barreled in an enormous wave. Except this wave is unforgiving concrete and when you lose your board—make no mistake, you will—it usually loops the pipe and shoots back

at your ankles with increased velocity and heat-seeking accuracy.

Each section expanding out from the full-pipe poses myriad challenges and opens into the next in an unexpected manner. The long, rectangular half-pipe at the top drops down into a tight western point that jags to a southern dip and then rises again into sprawling eastern pockets that send you around the full-pipe and back to the top. It's fun, no doubt, and obviously designed by someone with some serious chops, but everything about the layout is almost counterintuitive. Stay in the bowl long enough and a local will soon explain the riddle. Viewed from above, the pool is the exact shape of Texas.

WHEN I PARK MY TRUCK, MY back, my legs, and just about everything else has seized up from the drive. My heart is kicking, though, and adrenaline is fluttering in my veins. On skate trips of yore, a buddy used to describe the excitement of pulling up to a new spot as a bunch of butterflies landing on his palms. It's an apt, lovely description. All these years and miles later, the butterflies are still waiting.

The sun bears down, bright enough that parts of the park's polished concrete are blotted out. The August heat is so intense that most skaters won't start sessioning until dusk, but a few of us couldn't resist. A shirtless teenager, sheened in sweat and skating with earbuds, is trying flip tricks over a pyramid emblazoned with a giant Texas Lone Star. Elsewhere, a father is helping his daughter muster the courage to start at the top of a small quarter-pipe and ride down its slope, a basic but initially harrowing and decidedly tough-to-learn act called "dropping in." Her helmet is bubblegum pink with what looks to be a plush unicorn horn affixed to its top. Her mother stands at the ready to film the girl's attempts with her phone. At the bottom of the snake run, a cluster of dudes with shoestrings and expensive sneakers are playing S-K-A-T-E, the skater version of basketball's H-O-R-S-E. In a bowl shaped like a clover, a

man who looks uncannily like the great Billy Gibbons from ZZ Top is carving the corners with the effortless authority of someone who's been skating longer than I've been alive.

I spend the afternoon alone in the various parts of the Texas Bowl. After warming up with familiar tricks, I start trying to see how high I can ride in the full-pipe. A few very gnarly skaters have slapped stickers at almost 11 o'clock to mark their heights, but I'd guess I top out just under 10. On one run, I arc higher but my weight is off and I bail. On the way down, my board dings my shin and blood trickles into my sock. The cut will become the newest star in one of my constellations. Each subsequent attempt brings diminishing returns. I think I can get higher, but not today. As I catch my breath in the shade of the full-pipe, I start plotting another visit, one where I come equipped with stickers and a photographer. That's something else that has never changed: While I'm on a skate trip, I'm already planning the next one.

With the acoustics in the full-pipe, I can hear the other skaters in the park—their spinning wheels, their boards snapping the concrete, the cheers of onlookers as they attempt tricks. Everything echoes, reverberates into my body. The little unicorn girl has, I can tell from her parents' voices, started trying to drop in. Even without seeing her, I'm positive she's not leaning far enough forward. She's afraid to commit. No skater would ever blame her. The terror of pitching yourself forward and letting gravity do its work cannot be overstated. Remember the abject fear of jumping off the high-dive for the first time? Multiply it by a thousand. I lie back and let the curve at the bottom of the full-pipe support my body. I close my eyes and listen as she climbs to the top of the ramp and places her board on the coping and tries to find the courage to give it another go. She doesn't know if she can do it, and neither do her parents, but I do. She only has to let the board and her momentum carry her forward. She has to surrender to it, allow it to take over her life. She tries again, again, again.

Eventually I realize I'm no longer hearing the other skaters. There is only the sound of the girl falling, her parents asking if she's OK, and her saying she's almost got it. Maybe the grizzled ripper and the sweat-soaked dudes have packed up because of the heat, but it's unlikely. I'd bet anything they've stopped skating to root for the girl. They remember as well as I do the maddening frustration of learning to drop in, and we want her to feel what we've so often felt, the liberation—the sheer surprise and elation—of riding away from what you believed was impossible. For all of skateboarding's edgy individuality, hard-won grit, and righteous autonomy, we are a profoundly supportive and inclusive lot. This is why there are so many skate parks now, why skateboarding will debut in the 2020 Olympics, why the girl's parents have driven her here instead of absolutely anywhere else.

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She keeps falling. At this point, she may be leaning too far forward, trying to force herself over the hump. Her mother asks if she wants to take a break or drink some water. The girl tries again, again. She loses her board, chases after it. She flails another time, another. The sun is burning and she's thirsty, and her parents are growing more worried and impatient. So is she. She's about to give up when suddenly—shockingly, thrillingly, perfectly—she leans forward and her weight is centered and the board is still under her feet and she's whooshing

between her parents and they're cheering, as is every other skater in the park. She raises her arms in victory and beams as if countless butterflies have lifted her into the air and she's feeling borne aloft, her life opening up in a way she'd never dreamed.

Or so I imagine while I'm lying in the shade. All I know is she dropped in and everyone cheered, then she did it again and again, so many times I stopped counting. The other skaters return to their own tricks, and even though I'd thought I was done for the day, I do too. I lever myself up, leaving a sweaty outline of my body on the concrete, and climb to the top of the Texas Bowl. My muscles have seized up again. The blood on my shin has almost dried. I'm tired, hot, and middle-aged, but few things matter more to me than this. I put my board on the coping, then lean forward and relinquish control, hurtling toward the full-pipe, hoping to go higher than ever before. 🏂

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Dec. 7: Mesquite Arts Center
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Dec. 14: Mesquite Convention Center
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