THE EVOLUTION OF THE COWGIRL
BY SARAH HEPOLA

RODEO CLOWNS' EXTREME FEATS
BY W.K. STRATTON

VAQUEROS: THE ORIGINAL COWBOYS
BY KATIE GUTIERREZ

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THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

THE COWBOY ISSUE

SEPTEMBER 2021
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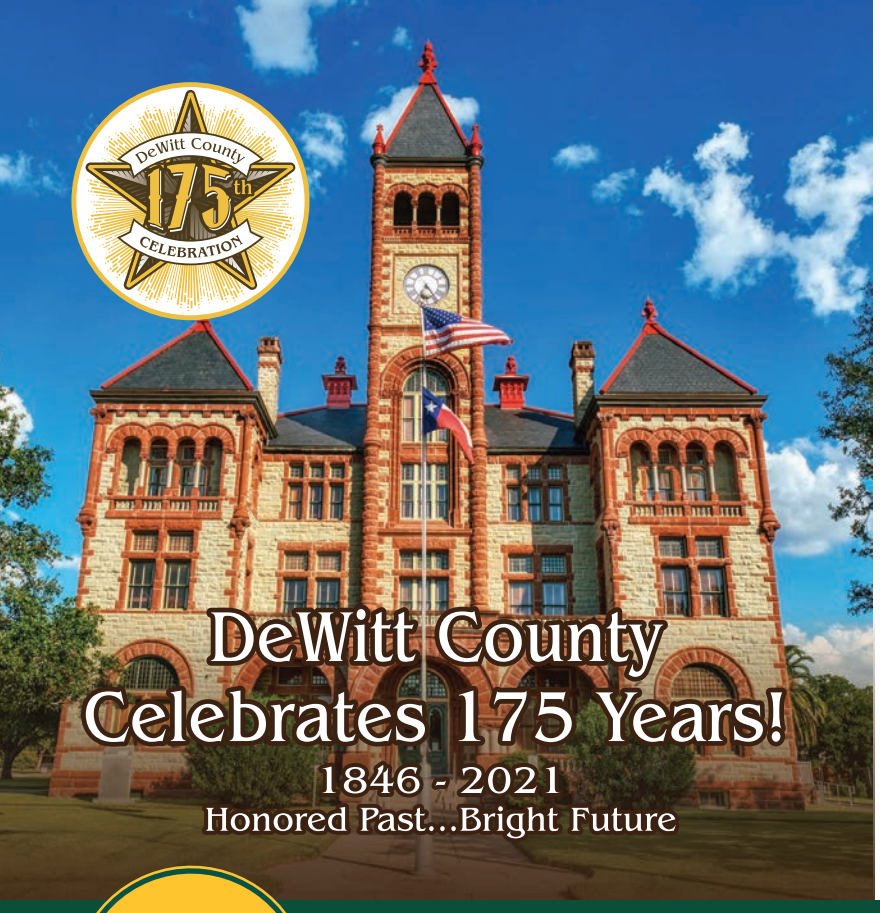

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EDITOR'S

NOTE

Photo: Dave Shafer

Horsin' Around

Once, when Maddie Ferguson was riding her horse at a rodeo in Bowie, she overheard a young girl exclaim to her mom, "Oh my gosh, she's a real cowgirl!" The 18-year-old Nocona High School graduate, pictured on the cover and above with her horse, Boonie, doesn't mind the moniker. "Rancher" and "horse trainer" also capture facets of her lifestyle, but if you ask her what she does, she'll say "I run barrels."

Ferguson's day-to-day routine on her family's 600-acre ranch in Spanish Fort isn't all that different from that of her ancestors, who worked the same land the family purchased in 1872. Most days, she wakes up around 5 a.m. to feed her horses and complete chores around the ranch. Then she might go into town and help clean rooms at the Red River Station Inn, the Nocona hotel her parents own. After lunch, it's back to the ranch to ride four or five of the family's 10 horses, half of which are rescues she is rehabilitating. Some afternoons she gives riding lessons to kids: "I've never seen a sad kid on a horse," she asserts. Ferguson hopes the lessons leave her students with a sense of accomplishment. "The No. 1 thing working with horses teaches me is patience and also contentment with myself."

On a good night, Ferguson heads to the rodeo, either to compete in barrel racing—which involves galloping horseback for speed around three barrels in a cloverleaf pattern—or to socialize with friends. While some may fear an eventual disappearance of the cowboy lifestyle, Ferguson says there are "a ton of girls" in North Texas doing the same things as her. "All the cowgirls, we're a family, and we support each other in many ways," she says.

Ferguson starts college in Stephenville in the fall—Boonie will come with her—and plans to major in animal science with an equine science minor. Regardless of where life takes her, she already knows she'll retire on her family's land and defend it from being divided or sold off. "I will probably fight for this land forever," she says.

That love of the land—working it, taming it, nurturing it—is the common thread that binds all the stories in this month's Cowboy Special Issue. It's in the tales of vaqueros whose hearts were said to give out the day they knew they were too old to work the land; the cowboy poets who immortalize their treasured landscapes in verse; and retired cowgirl Mama Sugar who laments the loss of a plot of earth she can cultivate with her hands. What they all recognize is one can't understand Texas without understanding the land. And who knows the land better than the cowboys and cowgirls who have and will continue to roam it?

Emily R Stone

EMILY ROBERTS STONE
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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VOLUME 68 . NUMBER 9

SEPTEMBER

PETE LICHAU chats with intern Maddy Cross at Rose Gate Farm in Argyle.

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

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ON THE COVER
Maddie Ferguson in Spanish Fort
Photo by Dave Shafer

Visit **texashighways.com** for more.

Photos: Melanie Grizzel (top); Eric W. Pohl (bottom)

TRADITIONS

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Behind the Story

When doing research for "The Original Cowboys" (Page 58), writer Katie Gutierrez realized she had never learned the histories of real-life vaqueros, despite having grown up in South Texas where they were historically abundant. "Looking at vaqueros as this really unrepresented, unknown entity that had so much to do with Texas ranching history made me really passionate," the San Antonio–based writer says. "They had been left out of the cowboy mythology, and I wanted to see why that was." Speaking with vaqueros made Gutierrez realize that while their lives were nowhere near easy, they wouldn't want it any other way. "Too modern of an eye can make you almost victimize them in your head," she says, "but that's the total opposite of what they experienced and what they would want. Every vaquero I talked to said it was the best way to grow up. They all said, 'I wish was back out there, sleeping under the stars.'"

Featured Contributors

Andy Hedges
The songster, reciter, storyteller, and collector of cowboy songs and poems wrote about the cowboy poetry tradition for "From Hide and Horn" (Page 82). Hedges grew up in the small Panhandle community of Tokio where he fell in love with cowboy music listening to his father's cassettes. "I've been reciting cowboy poetry for 25 years, so I feel like I've been preparing for this my whole life," says the Lubbock-based writer, whose repertoire includes classic cowboy poetry, obscure cowboy songs, Dust Bowl ballads, and blues. Hedges hosts the podcast *Cowboy Crossroads*, which features interviews with musicians and poets.

Andrea Luttrell
The North Texas–based author writes about the time she signed her son up for mutton busting at the Fort Worth Rodeo in "Hold on for Your Life" (Page 16). Luttrell now resides in nearby Dallas, which she says is a completely different city in terms of atmosphere. "I moved out of Fort Worth several years ago, but the city holds a special place in my heart," Luttrell says. "Where else can you find phenomenal art museums and a first-class rodeo in the same neighborhood?" Luttrell's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *D Magazine*, and *The Sun Magazine*.

Photos: Joel Salcido (top); Jessica Lifland (middle)

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It took a special kind of man / To see us and to understand / That hidden in this silent spot / Resides a land of Camelot.
Pam Haines, Lipscomb

TH: The above is excerpted from a poem Haines wrote to George Getschow, thanking him for his August story on the town.

Music Man
We just met him this weekend because of this article ["Hill Top Harmony," July]. Absolutely loved the food! Johnny Nicholas is such a down-to-earth man.
@savhunchasmom

Endless Summers
I grew up in Wimberley, and the Blanco was my go-to for endless hours of swinging off the rope with dear friends during my summers ["Behold the Bounty of the Blanco," July].
@claudiaannbutts

The Real Marble Falls
Just a few years back, the LCRA lowered the lake for cleanup, and the falls were visible ["Phantoms of the Falls," July]. I drove into Marble Falls just to see it.
Kathy Hudson, Austin

Down by the River

Great article on Leakey ["My Hometown," August]. For quite a few years, I would visit a dear friend who pastors a church there. Staying at my friend's house, he insisted on introducing me to Mama Chole's. Now my visits are not complete without at least a few meals at the best restaurant in town.

Phillip E. Schwab, Fort Worth

Spring in Your Step

What happy memories your article on Aquarena Springs brought back ["When Aquamaids Reigned," August]. We enjoyed the submarine theater, the glass-bottom boats, and staying in the hotel. Yes, I even remember the swimming pig. Now, all the aunts, uncles, and several cousins are no longer with us, but those times we spent together there will always be good to remember.

Stan Carter, Midwest City, Oklahoma

School Pride

Paul Brown's article on Brownwood left off a very important place in the city ["Bringing Back Brownwood," August]. Howard Payne University is a wonderful place established in 1889. I am a 1957 graduate of the school. Perhaps Brownwood could be revisited in the future for another article.

Benny Mayo, Red Oak

Captive of the Freeway

Joan Didion notwithstanding, I'm amazed that anyone could passionately embrace freeway driving ["Rapture of the Freeway," July]. Interstate 35, for all its constant presence in my life, is a horror. I find my Zen on the backroads, not just of Texas but all of North America. Blessed with abundant time, I can take six days to drive to Pittsburgh (as I did last month), with as little freeway travel as I can manage. It's on the charming two-lane backroads of this country where a driver can truly become an active participant in the drive. It seems to me that your essayist did little more than waste half a tank of gas.

Kyro St-Denis, San Antonio

Fair Error

On Page 76 of the Events section of the August 2021 issue, the subheading under "Fair Enough" states "Gillespie County hosts the oldest county fair in the state." That statement is not correct, as the Washington County Fair is the oldest in the state, established in 1868.

Gerald Parker, Victoria

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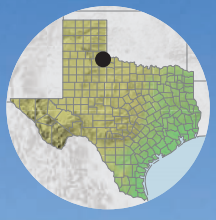
Hooked on an 8-Second Ride

While taking photographs this summer for "Fight or Flight" (Page 46), Dave Shafer visited the Jim Bowie Days Rodeo and Celebration in Bowie, between Wichita Falls and Fort Worth. Shafer was taking portraits of rodeo contestants when the sun descended behind the clouds, and he turned his attention to the arena. "The sun and clouds were my heroes at this moment," Shafer says. "The crowd was full and excited. I just needed some compelling action." Fortunately, the ranch bronc riders rose to the occasion. Shafer captured this cowboy as he was closing in on the 8-second buzzer, which marks the minimum time a rider must stay on the bronc to get a score. The rodeo is held annually at the Bowie Rodeo Arena during the last full week of June.

Photo: Dave Shafer



Childress

Rancher Jerod Session lives the good life on the Rolling Plains

By Russell A. Graves

BORN AND RAISED in the Childress area, Jared Session grew up in ranching and decided to make a career of it.

Photo: Russell A. Graves

Jared Session is a man of the land—specifically, the Rolling Plains of the southeastern Texas Panhandle. Born and raised in Childress, Jared left only long enough to earn a degree in ranch and feedlot operations at nearby Clarendon College before returning to work on the Buckle L Ranch south of town. Now, he shares his love of the land and the rural lifestyle with his wife, Suzy Session, and their three children. Surrounded by some of the nation's best cattle country, Childress took shape with the merging of two frontier towns and the arrival of the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway in 1887. As the Childress County seat, Childress became a center of trade and government, as well as a hub for agribusiness and ranching—a status it retains today. Only a few towns dot this part of the Rolling Plains, which locals refer to as the "Greenbelt" because it tends to get more rain than the rest of the Panhandle. Once home to millions of bison, the productive grasslands that carpet the 100th meridian are now the kingdom of their bovine cousins. Here, the image of the American cowboy remains a symbol of rugged individualism. "You hear a lot of people say this, but the appeal to being a rancher is that everything is different every single day," Session says. "I don't know that I'll ever do anything else."

The Ranching Life

"I was raised on a ranch just north of Childress, so I guess you can say it's in my blood. My dad was in the ranching business since before I was born. Being raised and immersed in the business from an early age and being exposed to the lifestyle of a rancher, it's just something to which I have always gravitated, and it's what I love to do. Caring for cattle, not being tied to an office, and making my living outdoors is like living a dream."

Getting Around

"From its founding, Childress has always been a small town out here on the frontier. It was formed along the railroad, and even now the railroad and the highway bring people through every day. People may not ever have come here had it not been for the mobility that transportation provides. As such, you can see the influence of the transportation industry here. Go downtown and see the brick streets that were laid by hand in the 1920s and the old steam engine that sits on display."

The Stock Show

"I showed animals when I was young, and so we like our kids raising animals and showing them through our local 4-H program. My 10-year-old son shows pigs and goats, and my 7-year-old twins will show livestock as soon as they're old enough. Raising animals is a great way to teach kids responsibility for a life other than their own. Childress has a new event center, so we have a great facility for our livestock show. It's great to see all of the families and kids who participate and help one another."

Childress City Limits

"What's nice about the area is that it's not hard to really be in the country when you leave the city limits. The terrain and the views around here are nice, and the area is full of natural beauty. When I go out to eat though, it's hard to go wrong with JT's Drive In. I really like the burgers, but the barbecue is also great. Because Childress is isolated, we have a few national brands, but most of the eating places are local."

Small-Town Values

"While Childress is my hometown and where I went to school, I grew up living outside the city limits. There are a lot of nice places in town, but I really enjoy being in the country. The town is full of great people, and we have lots of businesses for a small town. The thing I like about it is that even though Childress is a little 'bigger' than most places in this region, it's still a small town and has all of the benefits of small-town values. Here, you truly know everybody: your neighbors, the teachers at the school, and the people you do business with. Everyone here is ready to help others. Because I had a good experience of being raised in Childress, I want the same for my kids. I really never saw a reason to leave and go somewhere else."

TOWN TRIVIA

POPULATION:
6,048

NUMBER OF STOPLIGHTS:
5

YEAR FOUNDED:
1887

NEAREST CITY:
Wichita Falls, 108 miles southeast

MARQUEE EVENT:
Greenbelt Bowl All-Star Football Classic, a high school game held annually in June

MAP IT:
Childress County Heritage Museum, 210 Third St. NW


STOUT

Hold on for Your Life

A mutton busting competition binds a mother and son to their Texas roots

By Andrea Luttrell

I was at work in Dallas when I got the call that my son had been accepted in the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo's mutton busting competition. I almost dropped my phone on my desk out of excitement but pulled it together to phone my mother and let her know her 6-year-old grandson would ride an unruly sheep on the big stage come January.

Anyone could apply for one of the spots, but I had no idea how the rodeo officials chose the participants. Luck of the draw? First come, first served? All I knew is I paid an application fee, filled out a form with my son's name, age, and weight, and sent it off into the ether.

"Townes got in!" I squealed. "It's really happening! I can't believe it!"

My ex-husband and I named our son Townes after the singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt because we had fallen in love to his album *Live at the Old Quarter*. Van Zandt hailed from Fort Worth, where we were living at the time, and he sang odes to bandits, ne'er-do-wells, and country girls. Townes seemed like a perfect Texas name, promising a childhood spent running wild in the great outdoors. However, my Townes' childhood in the city had precluded such activities as building forts in the shrubby woods or riding horses or hunting for crawdads next to a warm creek. The rodeo was my son's chance to connect with his roots.

"You act like he just got accepted into Harvard," my mother replied. "Now what is it he's doing again?"

"Mutton busting!" I repeated, for at least the 10th time. "He's mutton busting at the Fort Worth Rodeo! We'll need to get everyone tickets to watch him."

"Sure, but what *is* mutton busting?" my mother asked.

Although they are fifth-generation Texans, my parents frequent the Fort Worth Opera far more than they do the Fort Worth Stockyards. It's entirely possible that neither of them has ever ridden a horse nor kicked up dust two-stepping in a country bar. Avid world travelers who had lived in Puerto Rico and Peru, my folks always struck me as disinterested in the trappings of Texas lore. I've never seen either of them do anything particularly "Texan" unless forced.

For example: In the late '80s, my father's company, a global pharmaceutical manufacturer that chose Fort Worth as its home base, hosted some overseas clients. The weekend included a visit to Billy Bob's Texas to show the foreign visitors some local color. My mother, then 48, had to buy cowboy boots at some tourist shop in the Stockyards to support the illusion of being a rollicking Texas gal.

Illustration: Jason Stout

All of this transpired despite actual Texas bona fides from both sides of the family, a larger-than-life history I adore. My grandma used to tell me how her great-grandmother could drive a team of 10 horses by herself and how her father, country-western songwriter J.R. Cheatham, penned two tunes featured on a 1963 album entitled *Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves and Other Truck Driving Favorites*: "Blue Endless Highway" and "Sleeper Cab Blues." I wondered if a deep and abiding love of Texas had somehow skipped my parents' generation and was threatening to skip mine and my son's.

I spent the better part of 10 years away from Texas in New York and California. In that decade I lost my accent and accumulated a wardrobe of primarily black and gray hues. I cut my hair, adopting prominent bangs that somehow seemed more Manhattan than Dallas. I love those big, coastal cities and relished the feeling of anonymity and opportunity they afforded me, but nothing compares to the Lone Star State and its mythos. I was beguiled by the "everything is bigger in Texas" attitude and by its reticence to let go of a cowboy culture that has long since faded from day-to-day reality for most of its residents. The closest I've gotten to livestock lately is a road trip to Fossil Rim in Glen Rose to feed nonnative quadrupeds from the safety of my RAV4.

I explained to my mother yet again the event for which I had signed up her grandson. Mutton busting is a fan favorite in rodeos across Texas. The competition involves dressing children between the ages of 4 and 7 (who weigh under 55 pounds) in bull riding gear—helmet, chaps, vest, the whole get-up—and then setting them on a sheep so furry it looks like a kitchen mop. The mutton burst out of mini bull chutes, with the kids nearly laying on top of them and clutching their wool in lieu of reins. As often as not, the kids slide comically off, caught by the forgiving sands of the arena, met with the gleeful applause of a rapt audience.

"Well, I'm not sure I get it," my mother said, "but your father and I will be there to cheer Townes on."

I grew up in a town on the outskirts of DFW with three stoplights, amateur rodeo, and 13 Baptist churches. I don't know if the church part is totally accurate, but it certainly captures the sense of Mansfield in the 1980s, when the only two non-chain restaurants were the Bronco Café, open for breakfast and lunch; and the Rodeo City Café, providing hearty chicken-fried steaks for dinner. My parents had chosen the area for its

stellar public schools and its Mayberry-esque sense of community, plus it was close enough to an airport to temporarily escape small-town life if it got too small.

The main entertainment in town was the Kow Bell Indoor Rodeo. Right off US 287, it proudly announced itself with a bright yellow sign and red lettering crafted to look like rope from a lasso. Bill Hogg opened the Kow Bell in 1959, and for nearly 50 years it held year-round rodeos on Saturday nights, presumably leaving Fridays free for high school football. The building was constructed from a large prefab barn and surrounded by what looked like wooden backyard fencing. Above a porch held up by columns fashioned from tree branches, a mural featuring lopsided, rough-hewn drawings of a barrel racer, bull rider, and calf roper greeted rodeogoers with a hint of the action inside. My parents never once took me, but I wondered about it every time we passed by.

An unlikely source finally introduced me to the rodeo. A colleague of my father's had moved his family, including their two sons, from Belgium to Mansfield. The oldest, Wim, was my age. To be from Belgium seemed almost magical—all superior chocolates and french fries with mayonnaise (a stroke of culinary genius in my opinion, raised as I was on sandwiches my grandfather "Poppy" made, consisting only of white bread and mayo). Wim's parents employed an au pair. I had never heard of such a thing. When my parents went out, a high school student who lived across the street babysat me. Wim's "babysitter" lived with their family all year. I can only imagine now how bizarre it must have been for her—to go from bustling Brussels to a place with no movie theater and only a few piddly blocks of downtown. Perhaps that's why she suggested taking me and Wim to the rodeo.

I can still remember the sweet, earthy smell of the sand and the animals, the feeling of my 7-year-old boot-clad feet swinging from the stadium chair because I was too short to touch the ground. At some point, they called for us kids to come down and chase a single calf let loose in the arena. The first child to snag

the blue ribbon from the calf's neck would win a whole dollar and have their name heralded from the loudspeaker. Little boys in jeans and sweatshirts popped up like whack-a-moles, racing down in search of victory. The girls stayed seated.

"You two should go down there!" the au pair said to Wim and me. I hesitated. Spectacularly unathletic even then, I dreaded humiliation. "I'll be the only girl," I said. "Even better," she replied in her rounded accent, giving my shoulders a push in the direction of the aisle.

Memory falters here, but I do remember the chaos of kids' bodies crashing into one another in a desperate attempt to capture a calf careering through us like its tail was on fire. A rodeo clown appeared, his face leathery beneath a grease-painted smile. He held the squirming calf by the tail, and I saw my chance. I elbowed little boys out of my way, struck with the passion of Joan of Arc launching into battle. My nimble fingers felt the plastic edge of the ribbon around the cow's neck. I grabbed it and yanked, immediately bewildered but jubilant at my win. Someone asked for my name, and the next second I heard the announcers broadcast it over the PA system. "I'm famous," I thought just as I saw the dollar bill flutter down from the announcers' box above the chutes, as if from the rodeo gods themselves.

Once home, I proudly presented my mother with the blue ribbon that had adorned the calf's neck. She reacted as she might have to a cat gifting her a bloody mouse. "What do you want me to do with it?" she asked, genuinely curious. It was Christmas, and inspired by holiday spirit and buoyed by triumph, I said, "We should hang it on the tree!" To her credit, she did. She placed it in a glass bauble. On it she wrote "Andrea, Winner-Calf Chase, Kow Bell Rodeo, Mansfield, c. 1985." For 35 years, it has steadfastly hung from the scratchy branches of our Christmas spruce, and I've been hooked on the rodeo ever since.

We moved from Mansfield to Arlington about the time I started high school. Gone was the Kow Bell and its rustic charm. Instead, each January, my friends and I flocked to the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo, incongruently nestled between the city's botanical gardens and nationally renowned museums. We would pop on our cowboy boots and explore the midway set in front of Will Rogers Coliseum, testing the fortitude of our stomachs by gorging ourselves on nachos, then hopping onto rides that spun you sideways and upside down. If we were lucky, someone's mom or dad worked for

the Basses or Moncriefs or Carters—those formidable scions of Fort Worth—and called in a favor to score us the coveted box seats where nothing stood between us and the arena but some flimsy wood.

Leaning out over the railings, we'd high-five the cowboys parading in, flinch when the barrel racers kicked dirt into our Diet Cokes, and stand up on tiptoes to see the pens where taut-muscled men tried to balance on soon-to-be-bucking broncos. Once, my friend Melissa and I witnessed a bull, flush with rage, clatter its horns against the walls of our box, the man riding him flung around like a rag doll. We couldn't help but squeal with delight.

The rodeo came to signify far more than an evening's entertainment. I relished times spent wandering aimlessly through the cattle barn with a boyfriend, gossiping with my girlfriends atop the midway Ferris wheel with the city as a glittering backdrop, or dropping a ridiculous $20 to buy a commemorative program hawked by a blond Junior League volunteer. I felt present at the rodeo, mindful among the whir of action. I was there and only there, not worried about whatever new problem my anxious teenage brain rallied around. I felt distinctly Texan in a way I rarely did.

When I sent in my son's application for mutton busting, I was signing him up for a type of Texas heritage that my grandmother had boasted about—tall tales of grit and humor with a bit of the absurd added in for flair. Our family came from Germany and Ireland before settling for a bit in Tennessee, then heading southwest to search for fortune in Texas. We farmed cotton and weathered the Depression by running a café next to a dance hall. My great-uncle was friends with LBJ and once advised the ladies of the Chicken Ranch about tax deductions. My grandfather worked at Texas Instruments in its early years but walked off the job after seeing rabbit tracks in the snow from his building's window, which inspired him to go hunting. My parents grew up with relatively little, telling stories about taking care of their youngest siblings or riding

continued on Page 94

TEXAS HIGHWAYS

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DRIVE

HUNDREDS OF BOOTS on shelves at M.L. Leddy's in Fort Worth serve as inspiration for custom designs.

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

RAZ HAS BEEN fitting people for custom boots at Leddy's for nearly two decades.

The Perfect Pair

Famed Texas bootmaker M.L. Leddy's is fixin' to celebrate 100 years of custom-made excellence

By Clayton Maxwell

If you want to feel like Texas royalty, get fitted for custom boots at M.L. Leddy's. Like a king or queen on a throne, you kick back in an engraved leather chair in the back of the Fort Worth shop while Raz—he prefers his first name only—focuses on your feet. In his cowboy hat and well-oiled ostrich-skin boots, the 18-year veteran of the shop's Stockyards location wraps measuring tape around the instep, the heel, and the ball of the foot with steadied precision.

"One of the first things I try to get people to do is come in and look around," Raz explains against a backdrop of shelves stacked with hundreds of boots—all varied in color, stitching, and design—that serve as imagination prompts. "It's like you tell your husband you want to buy a brand-new white Camaro with a red interior. He says, 'OK, I have one right here you can look at.' And then you say, 'Oh, maybe that red is a little much.' You have to see boots

up close to know what you really want."

As Raz measures my feet, a wall-mounted bison head gazes down on this sacred Texas ritual. When Raz traces a person's feet two times in one of Leddy's red leather-bound ledgers—once while standing and once while sitting—something momentous is happening. Not only is the customer on their way to boots that fit perfectly from day one, but their feet are also now a part of Texas history.

"Leddy's are widely known as being the Rolls Royce of boots," says Rodney Hawkins of Graham, who works in cattle, oil, and gas, and owns two pairs. "When you pull them on, they just kind of pop on your foot. It's a cool sound they make."

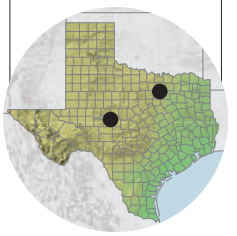
The fourth-generation family business, today employing two of Martin Luther Leddy's great-grandchildren, will celebrate its centennial in 2022. M.L. started the operation four years after he left his family's cotton farm in 1918. He bought the boot and saddle shop where he'd been employed in Brady and set out to make it his own. Measuring the feet of 1920s cowboys who paid about $25 a pair, M.L. developed a ledger system in which notes on arches, tracings, and measurements were faithfully recorded in a 17-by-11-inch leather-bound book.

When Leddy's outgrew its Brady location, M.L. moved the shop in 1936 to San Angelo, the eastern edge of the Permian Basin's booming oil economy. Comfortable custom-made boots were a necessity for cowboys who were on their feet all day. In 1941, M.L. opened a second shop in the Stockyards. Today, M.L.'s grandson, Wilson Franklin, reviews every entry recorded in the ledgers, just as M.L. did a century ago.

"Mr. Leddy was a wise man to determine that these measurements are something to be recorded for history," says Mark Dunlap, the general manager of the Fort Worth Leddy's and an old friend of Franklin's. In San Angelo, where all their custom boots are still made today, ledgers from the '20s contain the traced feet of many long-departed hard-working West Texas cowboys. In the Fort Worth store, the wall of the fitting room is lined with ledgers that date to 1941. Raz plucks out a random ledger from '43, revealing names of customers from across North Texas: Mineral Wells, Sulphur Springs, Denton.

M.L. LEDDY'S
2455 N. Main St.,
Fort Worth.
817-624-3149;

222 S. Oakes St.,
San Angelo.
325-653-3397
leddys.com



The ledgers are road maps for Leddy's bootmakers, who refer to them for years to come when a client needs adjustments or a new pair. They are documents of arcane trivia, too: The smallest boot recorded is a size 2; the largest, a size 22. The treasured records are also meaningful for customers.

"It's really special when you see an 18-year-old kid coming in with his granddad or even a great-granddad and they dust off his ledger and look at that old footprint from 60 years ago," Dunlap says. "To think about who they were back then and who they are today—I mean, the experience really can change people."

Generations of family stories are held in these ledgers, and so are some famous feet. Leddy's, honoring its origins as a working man's boot, downplays the fame factor and, respecting its customers' privacy, won't drop names. But the staff admits you can find the measurements of kings, presidents, and sports and movie stars within its pages. While I respect the discretion, a little searching on the internet suggests Paul Newman, Nolan Ryan, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Sam Shepard are among the VIPs who've walked in their own pair of Leddy's.

The ledgers also contain fragments of U.S. history. There are several entries in the '40s from GIs who, having just

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

THE LEDGERS AT Leddy's contain outlines of feet belonging to cowboys, politicians, athletes, and celebrities.

disembarked in Fort Worth from overseas, came to the Stockyards for a steak and a visit to Leddy's.

"We'll have those guys, World War II veterans, occasionally walk back into our shop," Dunlap says. "And you'll look up their boot measure for them, and it's an emotional moment for them and for us."

Moments like these don't happen when people buy boots over the internet. Nothing beats shopping in person at Leddy's, especially after a year of pandemic-induced online shopping. The smell of the leather. The gravelly voiced jokes of an old-timer who stepped inside the store to find a present for his wife. The sound of the staff's boots thudding neatly on the worn hardwood floors.

There's Andrew Douglas, proprietor of the $10 in-house boot-polishing service, who works with a visible smile even though he's wearing a mask. There's John Ripps, who oversees a menswear section including a Leddy label. There's Kimberly Davenport in womenswear, who hands me a flashy Vera Vasiley Western shirt to try on. "Vera is a Fort Worth icon," Davenport relays. "She started with Loretta Lynn back in the day, and she's all about stage presence with a vintage style." Tucked away on the third floor, there are saddle makers cutting, sewing, and hand-tooling custom saddles ideal for fancy gifts. (When he was president, George W. Bush presented one to Prince Charles).

And of course there's Raz, coaching me on how to best put on a pair of boots. "Stand up, and push and pull all in one motion," he says, helping me find the sweet spot where the boot slips smoothly over my heel.

In the front room of the Fort Worth shop, a quote attributed to M.L. is painted over the belt section: "The bitterness of poor quality is remembered long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten." I wince as I think about the cheap ropers I bought online last Christmas and how they hurt my feet.

"So many people don't wear boots, and the reason why is they've never had something that fits well," Raz says. "Once you get a boot that really fits you well, it will be your go-to footwear for everything."

After the time and care Raz put into measuring my feet, not only do I feel like a queen, but I also realize why boots that last, boots made especially for me, are worth the steep cost. And I'm pleased that my feet will now be part of Leddy's nearly 100-year history alongside thousands of others in the red leather-bound ledger.

Made to Fit

M.L. Leddy's custom boots start at about $1,400 for a pair of calfskin boots (best for riding and ranching), and customers can expect a one-year wait. A pair of shiny full-quill ostrich starts at $2,795. For a more affordable but still comfortable boot, the Leddy's Vaquero brand starts at $400. They may not be made-to-measure, but the cowboys like them. For a fitting, here's what to expect:

Step One: Choose your toe box: round, pointed, or French toe (a combination of the first two).

Step Two: Pick your heel height and shape.

Step Three: Select among four scallop designs (the design of the top of the boot).

Step Four: Decide on an arch. Try on sample pairs to see which feel the best.

Step Five: Get measured. Relax and let Raz or one of his colleagues do the work.

Step Six: Playtime. Check out the many samples of leather (ostrich, alligator, cow, etc.), stitch patterns, colors, and inlays, all on display in the Leddy's custom boots room.

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

RABBI ANDREW Bloom at the Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth.

Shalom on the Range

The cowboy spirit is a way of life for these Texas Jews

By Dina Gachman

I'm out at Charles B. "Chuck, the Wrangler" Hart's 36-acre property in Temple, where he leads me to the barn to show off his old riding saddle and the worn leather chaps his mom sewed for him over 50 years ago. After he's finished showing off some of his prized possessions, he opens a beautiful wooden cabinet hanging on the wall of his living room to reveal a 100-year-old Torah. "Most people think it's a gun cabinet," says Janet Hart, Chuck's wife.

Chuck is part of a small but mighty segment of Texas Jews who grew up riding horses, and in some cases wrangling and rodeoing, too. Chuck used to ride ponies after Sunday school on Main Street in Houston in the 1940s for 10 cents a pop. "It was 25 cents to ride the bigger ponies," Chuck says. His lifelong love of riding led him to the rodeo team at the University of Houston, where he competed in bareback riding and became president of the University of Houston Rodeo Association. "I've still got my spurs," he says. After a stint in the Army, Chuck got a job teaching horseback riding at Echo Hill Ranch camp in Medina. He loved instilling a passion for riding in city kids who had never been on horses before. He introduced those kids to the cowboy spirit—a love of adventure and a healthy dose of rebellion. That job at Echo Hill is where he got his nickname, and where he met Jan.

I was led to Chuck by Hollace Ava Weiner, a Texas-based Jewish historian and editor of the book *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas*. I wanted to know more about Jewish "cowboys" in the broadest sense of the word. If vaqueros drove livestock north of the Rio Grande in the early 1700s, and cowboy culture in Texas soon followed, how did Jewish immigrants—and my ancestors—fit into that history? I hadn't heard about many Jewish cowboys—the existence of cowboy churches hints at just how synonymous cowboying is with Christianity. Even so, I figured Jewish cowboys were out there, whether rodeo cowboys, ranchers, or country folks. It's just that none of the history books I was taught as a kid included anything about how Jews

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bareback rider Chuck Hart; musician Joe Buchanan; bull rider Jonathan Hochman.

got to Texas and whether they embraced its mythic culture. But Weiner helped turn the page by connecting me with others like Chuck.

My own family came to Texas the same way so many other Jews did, by fleeing religious persecution in Russia in the early 1900s and emigrating on ships headed to faraway places like Galveston. My great-grandfather, a Russian blacksmith who was shipped to Siberia to break wild horses, made his way to Fort Worth via Galveston and Texarkana. His son, my grandfather, was born in Texarkana and later played a cowboy in an episode of the 1960s TV show *Rawhide*, with Clint Eastwood. My dad in turn grew up dreaming of being a "real" cowboy, riding his horse, Easter, around ranchland in Fort Worth, across wide-open spaces that later became Hulen Mall, Loop 820, and Bryant Irvin Road.

Today, out of roughly 30 million people in Texas, there are about 176,000 Jews, up from 15,000 in 1899, according to the *American Jewish Year Book*. Prior to 1821, Spanish authorities required every resident to practice Catholicism, but that doesn't mean Jews weren't here; allegedly, some Jews fought at the Alamo. The myths about early Jews in Texas don't loom nearly as large as the mythology of cowboys in general, but they're out there. As for Jewish cowboys, most people probably think of musician and 2006 Texas gubernatorial candidate Kinky Friedman, who named his band The Texas Jewboys and released an album called *Last of the Jewish Cowboys: The Best of Kinky Friedman*. "There's something great about wanting to be a cowboy," Friedman says, "especially now that the world is so sanitized and trivialized."

The desire to be a cowboy was part of what drew Asleep at the Wheel frontman Ray Benson to the state. Benson, who grew up in Pennsylvania, says he was "fascinated by the history of Jewish people in Texas." As a 6-foot-7-inch redhead, he has more than once heard, "Funny, you don't look Jewish." Benson moved to Austin from San Francisco in the early 1970s "to become a Texan," which is evident in his customary cowboy hats and devotion to Bob Wills, the king of Western swing. His plan worked because in 2011 he was named "Texan of the Year" by the Texas Legislative Conference, and he has a plot reserved in the Texas State Cemetery. Benson and Friedman might not be out there roping cattle, but they embody a certain spirit of the cowboy myth—a myth that, over time, has expanded to include not just ranchers and ropers, but musicians, artists, chefs, and CEOs.

"I don't see a Jewish cowboy as being something strange," says Rabbi Andrew Bloom of Fort Worth's Congregation Ahavath Sholom. "I see it as a natural flow of culture, faith, religion, and where you live." Bloom founded the Cowtown Clergy, which brings a multifaith perspective to current affairs, from Winter Storm Uri to the George Floyd protests to the wisdom of Willie Nelson. Bloom also officiated what he claims is the only Jewish wedding to have been held on the floor of the Fort Worth Rodeo. "I'm not thinking of a person on a horse," Bloom says of the cowboy stereotype. "I'm thinking of a way of life."

That can take on many forms. There's the Luskey family, inducted into the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2018 for their Luskey's Western wear stores. There's Frances Rosenthal Kallison, a National Cowgirl Museum Hall of Famer who helped run a cattle ranch near San Antonio. The "Kallison Cowboy," a statue that stood atop Kallison's Western Wear store, became a local San Antonio landmark, though it is temporarily down for restoration. There's also Jonathan Hochman, a retired bull rider who lives on 10 acres in the "postage-stamp-size town" of McDade, with his wife, stepdaughter (who is a professional barrel racer), 15 horses, three dogs, five cats, and two goats. Like Benson, Hochman grew up in Pennsylvania, but instead of gravitating toward country music, his passion was extreme sports.

"I was never very good at bull riding, but I loved it," Hochman says. "When I started out, I hid my Jewishness under the nom de guerre Johnny Lee." Hochman was often the first Jewish person people had ever met in bull riding, but eventually he embraced his name and his heritage. Hochman says the best thing about bull riding was the people and places he encountered traveling around the state. "I went from Sweetwater to Lubbock, into the dust storms of the plains and the mesas of Big Bend," he says. One thing he learned after he stopped trying to separate his Jewishness from his life as a rodeo rider: "The differences aren't as great as some people think."

"I don't see a Jewish cowboy as being something strange," says Rabbi Andrew Bloom of Fort Worth's Congregation Ahavath Sholom. "I see it as a natural flow of culture, faith, religion, and where you live."

I'm no bull rider, but I understand Hochman's impulse to hide his Jewishness. I grew up saying the Lord's Prayer before middle school volleyball games. Someone actually drew a swastika on my notebook in school once, and experiences like that can make you guarded. For several years, I felt different and tended to keep my Jewishness to myself. A few of the people I talked with for this story had similar experiences, but most of them said that more often than not, mutual respect defined their experiences. A cowboy is a cowboy, whether they light a menorah or not.

Joe Buchanan, a musician who plays "country with a Jewish soul," spent much of his Christian childhood on a ranch near the border in South Texas. He went to church as a kid but never felt like he fit in. "I had never met a Jewish person growing up," he says. Eventually he fell in love with a Jewish woman, got married, and 13 years later told his wife he wanted to convert to Judaism. The transition shaped his music, with lyrics like "I've never been to Israel, but I've floated the Frio River."

On the road, Buchanan has visited Jewish communities from El Paso to McAllen to Houston, where he lives. A few years ago in Austin, when he was playing a show during SXSW, he "busted out a *shalom aleichem* onstage." A guy came up to Buchanan after the set and quietly, nervously asked him if he'd just heard Hebrew at a country show. "I said, 'Yeah, you did,'" Buchanan says. "And then I told him he didn't have to whisper."

Photos: Melanie Grizzel

Blazing Saddles

Oliver Saddle Shop makes all the tack a cowboy could dream of

By Christian Wallace

Mornings at the Oliver Saddle Shop in Amarillo are rarely quiet. The workshop is filled with the clinking of hammers tapping in nails, the scraping and cutting of leather, and the whirring of machines dating to the 1910s stitching together thick pieces of hide or cutting a strap just so. On cold days, you might find a few cowhands sipping coffee and swapping yarns next to the wood-burning stove. But the noise doesn't mean the scene isn't peaceful. To step into the rich smell of leather and hear Richard Oliver and his crew working on their handmade masterpieces is to know instant cowboy Zen.

This Panhandle institution is the oldest family-owned saddlery in the state. Richard's granddad, C.W. Oliver, started the business in Vernon back in 1917. Richard's father, Bill, relocated the shop to Amarillo in 1960, and Richard joined the family trade a decade later. Like other tack shops, Oliver makes an assortment of goods: bridles, cinches, medicine bags, spur straps, chaps, and breast collars. Today, Richard works alongside his two sons, Zeb and Bryan Oliver, and a fourth saddle maker, Colt Vernon. "We don't do any assembly line," Richard says. "Each guy takes the saddle start to finish, so each one is custom-made. We build about 75 a year, but we're a little over a year behind now."

Tack shops were once common all over the state, their wares in high demand with cowboys who needed to replace worn-out gear. But today, with fewer ranchers working their cattle by horseback and most goods made abroad, few shops like Oliver remain. Though the Olivers are well known, their clientele isn't famous—at least not to those outside of the ranching world. "Our main customer is the ranch cowboy," Richard says. "Our clientele is the best. We haven't had a hot check in years." *3016 Plains Blvd., Amarillo. 806-372-7562; oliversaddle.com.*

Photo: Justin Rex

Horsepower

Wild mustangs helped shape the state's cowboy culture

By Asher Elbein

Texas used to be horse country. In the 19th century, a vast swath of South Texas was known as the Wild Horse Desert, an unforgiving landscape of chaparral and scrub patrolled by herds of mustangs. These bucking broncos and faithful mares became a central part of Texan folklore. "Of all the monuments which the Spaniard has left to glorify his reign in America, there will be none more worthy than his horse," said Frederic Remington, a Western frontier painter, in an 1888 *Century Magazine* interview.

The first record of Spanish-imported mustangs in Texas dates to 1542. They likely got their name from the Spanish word *mesteño*, or "belonging to the stockmen." The Spanish mustang spread rapidly throughout the continent, and its agility, toughness, and endurance made it the favored horse of the ranch hand and frontiersman. Wild horses in the U.S. likely numbered in the hundreds of thousands at their peak. But with the enclosure of the open range, wild herd numbers dwindled due to habitat loss, competition with domestic horses, and efforts to round up and domesticate them. By the late 1800s, mustangs had disappeared even from Texas' Mustang Island, named for the abundance of the breed.

Though there aren't any truly wild mustangs left in Texas, a small number continue to roam public lands in Western states. And since they gave rise to many modern breeds, like quarter horses, their lineage remains in other horses today: a symbol of a vanished, fondly remembered frontier.

Giddyup

The **American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum** in Amarillo tells the history of the breed, which originated in part from Colonial Spanish mustangs and wild horses. It also contains the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame with portraits of famous horses and riders.
aqha.com

The **King Ranch Museum** in Kingsville memorializes the history of the South Texas rangeland that overlapped with the Wild Horse Desert, and it currently has an exhibition on the history of the ranch's quarter horses. The ranch also offers nature tours.
king-ranch.com/museum

4.6 feet
Height of an average Colonial Spanish mustang at the shoulder

1 million
Estimated number of wild horses that once roamed Texas

2,000
Estimated number of purebred Colonial Spanish mustangs left in the world

Hold Your Horses

Colonial Spanish. Bred originally from the mixture of Iberian and Arabian horses in Spain, this elegant, multicolored breed thrived in the Americas. All modern Western horses are descended—at least in part—from this breed.

Quarter Horse. Formally registered in 1941, the breed was originally known as a "quarter-mile running horse," as it is one of the fastest horses for the task. Their heavy hips and heavy shoulders bear fast-twitch muscles that "fire like a cannon," says Vickie Ives, owner of Karma Farms and vice president of the Horse of the Americas registry.

Thoroughbred. One of the oldest modern horse breeds, the thoroughbred is traditionally used for jumping, riding, and racing. Originally from England, the breed is relatively tall and lanky and is a mix between Arabian and native British horses.

American Paint. A white base coat and large blotches of darker color across the body forms the common "pinto" pattern of this breed. These are among the most popular American horses.

Bred to Be Wild

Once, the Colonial Spanish mustang ranged from California to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. But in the 1900s, ranchers began turning domesticated horses loose onto public lands, where they bred with Colonial Spanish mustangs. This led to the wild blend of American mustangs living on Bureau of Land Management land nationwide today. As a result, purebred Colonial Spanish mustangs are extremely rare.

Concerted Spanish mustang breeding efforts began in the 1950s, as enthusiasts worked to preserve the breed using careful lineage registries. With around 65 horses, the 150-acre Karma Farms in Marshall is one of the largest breeders of Colonial Spanish horses in the state. Vickie Ives, owner of Karma Farms and vice president of the Horse of the Americas registry, has bred them since 1973, when she rode a friend's Colonial Spanish mare during long-distance trail-riding competitions. She got herself a Colonial Spanish stallion and eventually started breeding her own. "Because the breed's so rare, you may have to search all over the U.S. to find a horse," she says.

Why keep these horses around? Not only are they handsome, Ives says, but they're fine horses and important to America's heritage. "They come from a time when horses were real transportation," Ives says. "They ran the Pony Express; they drove the Longhorns to market. Most people don't recognize them because they don't look like modern horses."

Illustrations: Marieke Nelissen

Cowboy River

The underrated Medina River winds through the Hill Country town of Bandera

By June Naylor

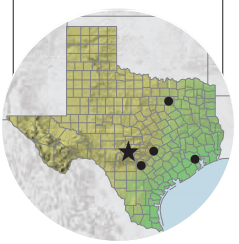
Photo: Erich Schlegel

San Antonio
1 hour

Austin
2 hours

Houston
4 hours

Dallas
5.5 hours



Of the rivers coursing through the Hill Country's western reaches, the Medina is the most likely to go unnoticed. The nearby Frio, Sabinal, and Nueces draw more attention due to greater access to vacation cabins and campgrounds, but the Medina is just as deserving for its serene and scenic qualities. The river cuts a twisting ribbon alongside the curves of State Highway 16 between the burgs of Bandera and Medina. Slow down and play on the river for a weekend, and you'll find out what you've been overlooking.

- STAY
- EAT & DRINK
- SHOP
- EXPLORE

Friday

3 P.M.

Ranch Living

Bandera, recognized as the "Cowboy Capital of the World" by the Texas Legislature in 2013, offers its share of ranch accommodations. Check into the Double U Barr Ranch, a bed-and-breakfast on 42 acres about 6 miles from downtown Bandera, with a creek for fishing, tubing, and paddleboating. Two petite but fully outfitted cabins provide kitchenettes. A complimentary breakfast in the main house includes a selection of grilled sausages, like buffalo, venison, and Alsatian, from the nearby community of Castroville.

4 P.M.

Take a Drive

Head west on SH 16, and follow the road about 13 miles until you reach Ranch Road 337 in Medina. Turn left to begin one of the most heralded drives in Texas. Between the 40 miles of hairpin turns and switchbacks through rocky ridges, stop for photos at the occasional turnout to gaze across patchworks of scrubby oaks, juniper, prickly pear cactus, and wildflowers. Few cars join you on the road, so take your sweet time.

6 P.M.

Dine and Dive

Back in Bandera, TJ's at the Old Forge is a Main Street hangout hitting all the high points for a stick-to-your-ribs meal with Old West flair. The signature dish is grilled quail breast wrapped in smoky bacon and glazed with tequila-lime butter. After supper, wander one street over to 11th Street Cowboy Bar, a rustic, rambling saloon with a hitching post out front. A live band fronted by a country crooner keeps the dance floor hopping, and the big back patio provides an ideal spot to sip a cold one.

Saturday

8 A.M.

Slow Flow

Lee Haile, a local river expert, guides a three-hour kayak trip on the Medina beginning at the Peaceful Valley crossing just west of Bandera. "The Medina's especially good to paddle in the summer, when the tunnel of shade through the cypress trees provides protection from the sun," he says. Like Haile, frequent kayaker Lisa Fitzsimmons, superintendent at nearby Lost Maples State Natural Area, enjoys paddling from Peaceful Valley south to the Tarpley Crossing. For more solitude, she prefers putting in at tiny Moffett Park in Medina and paddling about four hours down to Peaceful Valley, taking time during the trip to pull over and eat a sandwich. "It's such a nice, shady paddle alongside SH 16," Fitzsimmons says. "The water is clear enough to see the bass and catfish swimming around."

1 P.M.

Work Out Your Core

Lunch at Love Creek Orchards sates a mighty appetite worked up on the river. Found in the center of Medina, the little rock house stocks apple jams, jellies,

OPENING PAGE: Harrieth Stewart leads one of her Bandera Historical Rides through the Medina River. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Kayak guide Lee Haile on the Medina River; necklace from American Indian Jewelry store; 11th Street Cowboy Bar; Stewart rides through Bandera; burger from Apple Store Patio Café.

Photos: Erich Schlegel

and pies made with fruit grown behind the shop. The adjacent Apple Store Patio Café serves a juicy pepper jack burger topped with applewood-smoked bacon on a jalapeño-cheese sourdough bun. The café's chunky chicken salad on a bed of greens with fresh crudités and apple slices proves lighter but equally satisfying. Apple ice cream is what's for dessert, naturally.

3 P.M.

Flights of Fancy

Ramble around downtown Bandera and check out local boutiques. The American Indian Jewelry Store on Main Street stocks an impressive supply of rings, bracelets, and necklaces made on Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo reservations in New Mexico and Arizona. At the other end of Bandera's small downtown, Hyo Silver's log cabin façade reveals a store selling watches, belt buckles, knives, cuff links, spurs, and wedding rings crafted in contemporary Western designs by on-site silversmiths.

The Bandera Ale Project, a modern watering hole perfect for slaking hot afternoon thirst, sits at the east end of town in a newer retail development. Fill out a beer flight with housemade craft brews like Black Pepper Saison, Leo IPA, Mr. Bigglesworth Porter, and Fat Guy in a Little Coat Stout.

6 P.M.

Splash Zone

Bandera City Park presents a picture-perfect evening setting with its verdant green lawn sloping down a slight hill to the Medina River, where you share the peaceful bank with resident ducks and geese. Swimming is allowed here, so take a plunge if you need cooling off. Afterward, wander over to Brick's River Café, a pretty stone house overlooking another bend in the Medina. Reliable comfort food favorites include fried green tomatoes and thick-cut onion rings for appetizers with meatloaf and smashed potatoes as the main course.

Sunday

9 A.M.

Giddyup

Enjoy a last fling with the river by mounting a horse to ride alongside and into the shallow parts of the Medina. The one-hour outing with Bandera Historical Rides takes place in Bandera City Park in the stillness of early morning. Guides can extend the adventure for guests wanting to roam around town, learn more about Bandera history, and enjoy lunch nearby. It's a good chance to delight in the river again—and wonder what took you so long to appreciate it.

CAMP OUT

Medina Highpoint Resort, 23 miles from the center of Bandera and 10 miles north of Medina, provides tent camping, RV sites, and cabin rentals. The grounds offer a swimming pool, bath houses, and fire rings, along with easy access to a pond and Robinson Creek. Pets are permitted, too. 23195 SH 16, Medina. 800-225-0991; medinahighpointresort.com

THE EVOLUTION OF THE

TEXAS COWGIRL

Cowgirl mythology can often obscure the genuine articles. From hardscrabble farm workers to bronc-riding beauties, cowgirls contain multitudes.

BY SARAH HEPOLA | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIFFANY HOFELDT

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cowgirl McKenzie Siecko on her family's ranch in Morales; mural by Richard Haas outside the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth; Mama Sugar watching her horses from the patio on her Fresno farm.

THIS PAGE: TERRI KELLY MOYERS' PAINTING, "ROUGH AND READY," AND MEHL LAWSON'S STATUE, "HIGH DESERT PRINCESS," AT THE NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME. OPPOSITE PAGE: MAMA SUGAR'S HORSES; MAMA SUGAR HOLDS UP PHOTOS OF HER COWGIRL ACTIVITIES.

Mama Sugar swore she'd never move back to the country. "I didn't want to see the back end of a horse again," she says, offering the kind of chuckle you might expect from a woman nicknamed Mama Sugar. A chuckle with an entire narrative arc. Born in 1939 as Nathan Jean Whitaker—a boy's name; she got used to it—Mama Sugar was raised by her uncle in a tiny East Texas community called County Line, and by age 6, she had learned the land. Working the fields, herding the cattle and horses, picking the corn and peanuts and watermelons, which were the worst—so much labor to grow those danged watermelons she refused to eat them for years.

It was a cowgirl's childhood, though she didn't see it that way. It was just life. At an age when other kids rode bikes, she rode a sled, a homemade wagon with a mule in front used to plow the fields. She remembers her uncle setting her on the flat metal bed and handing her the reins. "Now get on to the house," he instructed, and she cracked the reins and let the mules glide her back.

The cowgirl is a figure both iconic and overlooked. The word calls to mind rodeo stars, or a fashion line of rhinestones and turquoise, but a cowgirl could refer to any woman tasked with the enormous upkeep of rural life. She might be outlaw or helpmate, cattle driver or keeper of books. Ranch wives like Henrietta King of the legendary King Ranch certainly qualify as cowgirls, although history has a way of only counting the women who did "men's work," rendering many cowgirls of the past invisible, even as their lore grew. The cowgirl became a romantic fable.

Mama Sugar didn't ride horses for fun; horses were for work. No time to gallop through the fields when they demanded so much attention. She liked school, though it was a 2-mile walk, and when she returned home each afternoon, she placed her books alongside the road while she tended the earth till the edge of dark, occupying herself by singing and reciting poetry. *Give to the world the best you have and the best will come back to you.* That Madeline S. Bridges poem was her favorite.

When she finally made it off the farm—to Houston, where she became a beloved fixture known, among other things, for her cooking and teaching Black folks to two-step—she swore up and down she'd never return to the country.

But life has a way of tugging you back. She spoke to me from the porch of her property in Fresno, a 30-minute drive south of Houston and four-and-a-half hours south of the fields she plowed in County Line. Now 82, Mama Sugar uses a wheelchair, but her daughter Vanessa positioned her so she could look at the horses swishing their tails.

Years ago, she had a hip replaced after she started limping. The doctor brought back the X-ray, and she remembers his exact words. "Lady, I don't know where the hell you come from, but you have done some hard-ass work in your life."

"The life I've seen?" She chuckles again. "Nobody knows."

I reached out to Mama Sugar because I wanted to meet a real-life cowgirl. I'd become fascinated by the cowgirl mythology, though my education had been mostly relegated to gift shops I browsed on trips through Texas and the Southwest. The stores sold feisty T-shirts and postcards of pin-up types in hot pants and ten-gallon hats. A bit kitschy, but I was drawn to their spirit: defiant and glamorous at once.

I grew up in Dallas, only an hour and a half southwest of County Line but spiritually another planet. Dallas is a city of highway squiggle and tall glass boxes, and I considered my family hardscrabble because we never got cable. I was obsessed with Hollywood—not the Westerns I flipped past at the end of the dial but the glittering tales of Manhattan and Los Angeles, two great cities I have spent enough time in to realize I don't belong there. So, much like Mama Sugar, I moved back to the place that shaped me.

But I travel quite a bit, one more modern woman roaming the prairie in a two-door sedan. Five years ago, I stayed in the Calamity Jane room of the Silver Saddle Motel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and as I read about the woman born Martha Jane Cannary—hard-drinking, dressed like a man but deeply maternal, an orphan who did what she could to survive, which included leveraging her body for money—I wondered why I didn't know more about these characters. They were so much more complicated than the cinematic mythos or the cutesy Varga girls who'd come to represent the brand. Cowgirls struck me as forgotten feminists, whose tales of making their way in a man's world remained untold in an era that loves to celebrate women's transgressive power.

Cowgirls have long operated outside the mainstream culture, though. "Many of the cowgirls preferred working cattle to campaigning for the vote, and riding broncs to discussing women's newfound independence," writes Elizabeth Clair Flood in her coffee table book *Cowgirls: Women of the Wild West.* The book is a primer on this fertile territory, reminding us of legends like tiny Victorian sure-shot Annie Oakley and Texas horse thief Belle Starr, whose unsolved murder (shot in the back in an ambush) made her the subject of paperback novels and landed her in two Bob Dylan songs. But Flood also introduced me to new heroes. Trick rider Alice Sisty rode two horses "Roman style" over a convertible in 1938 (Google it), looking like a female Evel Knievel. In 1925, Gene Krieg Creed rode bucking broncos to the title of "Champion Cowgirl of the World" at the Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming. Her career

ended in 1941 when her horse got spooked during a show and she fell, dangling from the saddle as the horse bolted around the ring. By the middle of the 20th century, concussions and fatalities contributed to the end of women riding broncs, though the practice is on the rise again as women claim a larger space in the rodeo circuit. But American audiences tend to fold the tent on anything deemed too dangerous for women (while football reigns as the country's favorite spectator sport), and whether such caution demonstrates respect for women or disdain for women is a debate for another time.

Flipping through the glossy black-and-white photos in the book, I noticed how contemporary these outsiders from the 1920s and '30s looked, with their short wavy hair, dirt-spattered pants, and slash of lipstick for good measure. Chic, pretty, with a touch of androgyny.

Many of those photos come from The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, which began in a Hereford basement in 1975 but later moved to Fort Worth's Cultural District, a modest gem beside the opulence of the Kimbell Art Museum and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Recent renovations brought cool interactive features like a photo booth and a mechanical bull, but I was disappointed that many of the pictures that dazzled me in the book were not on display when I visited. Instead, an exhibit on women and their horses somehow included Miranda Lambert's pink guitar, Reba McEntire's TV script, and a display on Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, raised on an Arizona ranch.

I got a richer sense of life as a cowgirl from the 2020 documentary *Good Ol Girl*, which follows three women steering the ranching world into the 21st century. *Good Ol Girl* was made by Austin-based filmmaker Sarah Brennan Kolb, who grew up traveling across Texas with her lawyer mother. At 7, she moved to an Arlington home where she could see horses in a pasture down the street but also Mr. Freeze, the reverse-blast roller coaster at Six Flags, and if that isn't a Texas girlhood, I don't know what is. Sarah struggled to find her place.

"I had a boyfriend in college who said, 'You're ambitious,'" Sarah told me over the phone from Coleman, where she was screening the documentary. "I was like, 'Thank you,' and he was like, 'That was not a compliment.'" She went on to pursue filmmaking in New York City but was tugged back to Texas. Her mom was representing a woman in South Texas who owned a cattle ranch. "I thought girls weren't allowed to do this," Sarah remembers thinking. But while some Texans may tut-tut ambitious women, that has not kept ambitious women from thriving.

The conflicts of *Good Ol Girl* will be familiar to audiences, even if the landscape is not. The protagonists are caught between work and family, old ways and new, being a lady and doing a "man's work."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: PHOTO AND BOOTS ON DISPLAY AT NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME; MANDY DAUSES, MANAGER AT RUSH CREEK RANCH, IS A SUBJECT OF THE DOCUMENTARY *GOOD OL GIRLS*, DIRECTED BY SARAH BRENNAN KOLB (BELOW).

"We're going through a huge period of transition environmentally, politically, and gender-wise," Sarah says. "I think that's scary for a lot of people, but it doesn't have to be. We can love where we're from, we can honor our traditions and our past, but also talk about things that need to change."

At a time when farms are collapsing and urban creep is endless, I had to wonder if the cowgirl was disappearing, but Sarah thinks the opposite is happening. "I've seen the rise in a few short years of young women joining the industry. The cowgirl isn't just going to survive in that realm, I think she is going to save it."

I asked Sarah to name her favorite cowgirls, and she expounded on Ann Richards, but then she mentioned a name I did not know, Cowgirl Hall of Fame inductee Mollie Taylor Stevenson Jr.—and my education expanded.

Before you meet Mollie Taylor Stevenson Jr., you must hear the extraordinary tale of her family. It begins pre-Civil War, when 16-year-old Edward Taylor contracted tuberculosis and moved back to his parents' ranch outside Houston near what is now NRG Stadium. This being 1856, the family purchased an enslaved woman named Ann George to nurse Edward back to health, but something else happened. They fell in love and lived as man

and wife, though they weren't allowed to marry. Ann urged Edward to buy his parents' property in 1875, and they passed it on to their six children, who turned it into one of the oldest Black-owned ranches in the United States, the Taylor Stevenson Ranch.

Born in 1946, Mollie is the great-granddaughter of that couple. She learned to ride a horse named Hildegard barefoot when she was about 5. "Oh we had a time," she says. But the children also had to work the land. They took care of 30 or 40 cows, and Mollie remembers waving down cars on Almeda Road to let the cattle cross.

Mollie's cowgirl childhood was not typical, although maybe no childhood is. Her mother, Mollie Sr., traveled to the Yucatán Peninsula and returned with three serapes and enough items to open their own shop. Mollie Jr. (one of only a few female juniors she knows of) loved designer clothes so much she became a model, first in New York City and later in Kansas City, but eventually she moved back to the ranch. She once toured Oklahoma's National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum and was struck by the fact that the exhibits included so few Black people. That's just how it was then.

Mollie changed that, opening the American Cowboy Museum on the Taylor Stevenson Ranch two decades ago. It's a place that preserves and interprets "the art, history, and

culture of the contributions of African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and women to the development of the American West," according to the museum's website. There is a petting zoo and a collection of handmade quilts Mollie calls "a whole language." And of course there is Mollie, 74 and still living on the ranch, where she wears bright jewelry and Resistol hats, the straw kind easily shaped by the hands. "The more tattered they are, the more I like them," she says.

Mollie and her mother were the first living African American women inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in 2001, but when I told her what this story was about, she informed me my cowgirl education was not complete.

"Have you talked to Mama Sugar?" she asked.

Now I had my next marching orders.

Mama Sugar was still young Nathan Jean when her father went into the Army, and when he returned, he settled in Portland, Oregon. Her mother lived in Lufkin, but our heroine wound up living in County Line with her father's brother, who showed her country ways and how to cook. "Oooh he could barbecue," she tells me. "He could barbecue goat, and you'd never know it was goat."

After high school, she moved to Nacogdoches to be closer to her mother, where she worked at Grant's Boarding House, run by a woman whose decadent pecan pies helped round out Nathan Jean's burgeoning culinary skills. She married a man named Lonnie, though everyone called him Lonesome, and they settled in Houston to start a family.

They had five daughters, which became six when she took in another girl, but the marriage ended after 10 years. She traded long days in the field for long days as a domestic worker and nights doing janitorial shifts. She took the bus from Third Ward to Sunnyside to drop off the girls at a babysitter, then went back to the babysitter after work, and rode the bus to Third Ward again. She loved to garden. She could grow just about anything in a plot of earth, and she tried to enlist the girls to help, but they mostly played with the water hose and ate the tomatoes instead of bringing them inside.

She got her nickname because she was hanging out at a joint in Arcola called the Sugar Shack, where she taught two-step when disco was all the rage. Country radio was all she'd known. Her favorite was Kenny Rogers, but she loved Dolly Parton, too. She spent much of the 1980s at that place, and her girls started referring to her as, "Mama—you know, Mama at the Sugar Shack." Thus Mama Sugar was born.

"I messed around and married Mister Sugar," she says, meaning Sugar Shack owner Ron Mitchell, who liked his nickname so much he legally

ANKOLE-WATUSI, A BREED OF DOMESTIC CATTLE ORIGINALLY FROM AFRICA, ON THE RANCH OF MOLLIE TAYLOR STEVENSON JR.; NATIONAL COWGIRL HALL OF FAME MEMBER MOLLIE TAYLOR STEVENSON JR.

changed his name, though the marriage was done after seven years together.

During the '80s, she met "the cowboys," a group of men including Myrtis Dightman, the first Black man inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame. Those cowboys introduced her girls to the Black rodeo circuit, where they excelled at roping, barrel racing, bull riding, and mule-skinning (a kind of mule racing). They became fixtures on the growing scene and competed in the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, named after the legendary Black cowboy from Central Texas who invented bulldogging.

Mama Sugar kept finding new adventures, too. She was a cook for her riding group, the Sugar Shack Trailblazers. Her Juneteenth barbecue became so fabled that *Gourmet* magazine wrote about it in 2006, and the recipe for her sweet potato cobbler made it into the 2012 cookbook *Texas Eats*. Mama Sugar comes from a long line of preachers, and she is a natural storyteller. For years she gave lectures around Houston and at Mollie Taylor Stevenson Jr.'s American Cowboy Museum.

She'd moved back to the country by then. "The girls wanted to be on the land," she says with a sigh. They loved their horses, and Mama Sugar might be tough, but as a mother, she is the unconditional type that doesn't like saying no. Her girls Vanessa and Beverlyn live with her on the property these days, helping to care for her since she fell ill.

She has four grandchildren who scamper around when they visit, and she'll put them to work with a wheelbarrow. "Mmm-hmm," she says, pleased with this inheritance.

The only thing that bothers Mama Sugar is that she doesn't have a garden. She was in the hospital for a while having a disc placed in her neck, and she misses a plot of earth she can cultivate. "I had greens, I had cabbage, I had beets, carrots, you name it." Her voice takes on a singsong quality. "Peas, cucumbers, squash. A nice garden."

I think what drew me to cowgirls was a sense these women knew something I did not—how to travel unpaved roads, how to be strong and soft at once. The cowgirl story is about finding your way in a place that was not built for you, though perhaps no place ever is. The story of human progress is one of taming an unforgiving landscape, and the journey shapes all who take it.

"What does it mean to be a cowgirl?" I ask Mama Sugar before we part.

"The main thing it means is relaxing," she says, which is not the answer I expected. "You wear your boots, you wear your hat, you wear your long-sleeve shirts, and you wear your jeans. It's a relaxed thing. And the second thing is, it's fun. Riding the horses, loving the outdoors, loving the animals."

"Do you have to grow up on a farm to be a cowgirl?" I ask.

Mama Sugar chuckles in a way that makes me know I'm going to miss her, even though we just met, and she gives me one last piece of parting wisdom. "Anybody can be a cowgirl," she says.

THE AMERICAN COWBOY MUSEUM is currently open to visitors by appointment only. Call 713-478-9677 to schedule a visit. 11822 Almeda Road, Houston. *theamericancowboymuseum.org*

NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME Closed Mondays. Open Tue-Sat 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sun noon-5 p.m. 1720 Gendy St., Fort Worth. 817-336-4475; *cowgirl.net*

FIGHT

BY **W.K. STRATTON**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DAVE SHAFER**

WHETHER YOU CALL THEM RODEO CLOWNS OR BULL-FIGHTERS, THESE MASTERS OF THE ARENA ARE NO JOKE

or *FLIGHT*

TO WARD OFF COWARDICE, NEVER WEAR YELLOW OR EAT CHICKEN ON THE DAYS YOU RIDE.

This was one of the rodeo axioms my mother taught me as I was growing up. Placing your hat on a bed was a sure invitation for bad luck. And always respect rodeo clowns: They're the best athletes in the arena, and they save lives.

The last one perplexed me when I was young. Clowns were the guys who strutted around dusty small-town rodeos in ragged outfits while carrying out groanworthy banter with the event announcer. Sometimes they performed tricks with dancing burros or hoop-jumping dogs. Other times, they might drive around in a tricked-up old car with an exploding muffler and a radiator that could spew water like Old Faithful.

The athleticism of rodeo clowns was lost on me until I got older and realized their work is just as dangerous and exciting as the bull riders they're employed to protect. Working in teams, their job is to distract an enraged bull from attacking the rider who's just been catapulted to the dirt. The clowns working on foot—as opposed to manning a barrel—have come to be known as bullfighters. You can watch their feats of agility, speed, and strength at bull-riding events across the country.

"A human's instinct is to run away," says Weston Rutkowski, of Haskell, one of the best bullfighters in the business. "That's the worst thing you can do in this particular sport. A bull's got four legs. We've got two. So they're going to run you down in a straight line. You have to be ready to move in the moment a rider starts to fall off. If you don't come in until they hit the ground, you're four steps late."

While their job has little in common with the matadors of Mexico and Spain who share the "bullfighter" name, rodeo bullfighters must also overcome basic safety impulses.

"Bullfighters, without hesitation and at any given moment, will step in harm's way to keep a bull rider safe," says Tuff Hedeman, a four-time world champion bull rider who lives outside Morgan Mill, north of Stephenville. "That's why we call them bullfighters."

Bullfighting runs in the family for Brandon Dunn, a rodeo clown from the North Texas town of Petrolia. Dunn fought bulls until injuries from a car wreck in 2003 robbed him of his speed. Now he entertains audiences as a clown and barrelman, working in tandem with his 17-year-old son, Brendall Dunn, a bullfighter. The father-son team works about 20 rodeos a year.

"It got to where I was put together by bailing wire and duct tape, and I just couldn't fight bulls anymore," Dunn says. But that didn't dissuade Brendall, who worked his first rodeo at age 12. Brandon says he has coached his son carefully.

"There's a mental maturity you have to reach, no matter how athletic you are," he says. "We would bring him up with some slower and older bulls and transition him to faster bulls. Now he's fighting anything that comes out of the chute."

Clowns began showing up at American rodeos around the turn of the 20th century when the primary events were saddle bronc riding, steer roping, and bulldogging. Their job was to entertain the crowd as an arena was being reconfigured between competitions. But then in the 1920s and '30s, bull riding became a popular addition to the rodeo lineup. Pickup riders on horseback could assist a bucking bronc contestant in a graceful dismount. But bull riding was a whole different matter. It was too dangerous for a pickup rider and his horse to get in close with a bull. Bull riders inevitably hit the dirt with an angry animal anxious to attack. The best way to protect a fallen rider was for another person to distract the bull. That responsibility eventually fell to the clown.

As a hotbed for rodeos, Texas has produced a prominent line of influential clowns. Ralph Fulkerson, a bull rider from Midlothian, 25 miles southwest of Dallas, changed the game when he switched to bullfighting in the 1920s. He developed a cornball humor act that involved his mule, Elko. After numerous injuries, Fulkerson came up with a way to protect himself by introducing the clown's barrel to bull riding. His first barrels

OPENING SPREAD: Bullfighter Glenn Patrick in Thornton. **THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:** Brendall Dunn, left, and his dad, Brandon Dunn, prep for a rodeo; the bucking-horse chute in Bowie.

were made of wood reinforced with metal. Fulkerson would draw the bulls away from the bull riders and toward the barrel. Then he'd hop inside the barrel and allow the bull to bang away at it with its horns.

Clown barrels became standard at rodeos and remain so today. But they never provided complete protection. Fulkerson was gored several times by bulls who were able to pierce his barrel. Even if the horns don't get to the man inside "the can," a bull attack is a harrowing experience.

Bullfighting began to take off as an art form in the 1970s. Skipper Voss, from Crosby, became a crowd favorite with athleticism and speed when pulling bulls away from fallen riders. He took the sport to a new level by extending the contest. Bullfighting itself became performance art.

Probably the most famous rodeo clown in history is Leon Coffee of Blanco. He tried his hand at other rodeo events before taking up bullfighting in the 1970s. Coffee proved to be an innovator, adding flourishes such as disco moves to his bull-distracting routine. But when the injuries mounted up, Coffee became a barrelman to continue his career. The 67-year-old makes occasional rodeo appearances these days.

While you'll still see clowns working out of barrels and bantering with the announcers at traditional rodeos, modern bullfighting is light-years beyond the days of Voss' and Coffee's prime. The sport went through a radical change in the early 1990s when Hedeman and other top bull riders broke away from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) to form the Professional Bull Riders (PBR). The speed as well as the bucking and spinning ability of the bulls increased dramatically.

Bullfighters have adapted accordingly. At some rodeos, the trappings of the rodeo clown have disappeared. Bullfighters' work has become so refined that it developed into a sport itself—freestyle bullfighting, in which bullfighters show their stuff while challenging real fighting bulls. The Bullfighters Only (BFO) tour showcases their skills—no bull riders involved. "It's myself versus a Mexican fighting bull for 60 seconds," Rutkowski says. Judges score fighters on technique and wow factors, including leaps over the bull.

The jalopy-driving rodeo clowns of my childhood in the 1960s would be dumbfounded by what occurs at BFO events. These bullfighters practice acrobatics reminiscent of the Minoans: They've been known to jump completely over a bull and perform flips. Though some of the participants wear clown makeup in homage to the past, freestyle bullfighting has an X Games vibe.

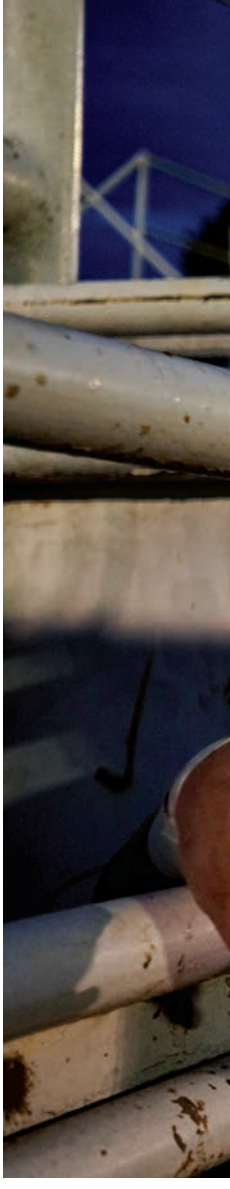
The satisfaction bullfighters receive from their sport comes at a cost. Rutkowski has an injury list that includes a fractured orbital bone in his face and a head laceration that cut to his skull. Yet he keeps at it. I asked him if he'd ever experienced anything else in life quite like the adrenaline rush that comes with fighting bulls. He answered with the understatement typical of the rodeo world: "I can't honestly say that I have."

CLOCKWISE: A pre-rodeo prayer at the Thornton Homecoming Rodeo; rodeo clown and barrelman Brandon Dunn; bullfighter Glenn Patrick paints his face for the Thornton rodeo.


Justin
Justin
Justin
Justin

Bullfighter Brendall Dunn puts on protective equipment, including knee braces and a padded vest, for the 4th of July Rodeo in Canadian.

Bullfighter Trent King distracts a bull at the Jim Bowie Days Rodeo in Bowie.



CLOCKWISE: Brandon Dunn takes the barrel in Canadian; his son, Brendall Dunn; Brandon Dunn signing autographs.


RAK CHAZAK


Brandon Bunn

FROM LEFT: Brandon Dunn presides over the calf scramble in Canadian; junior clown Riggin Garrett in Bowie.

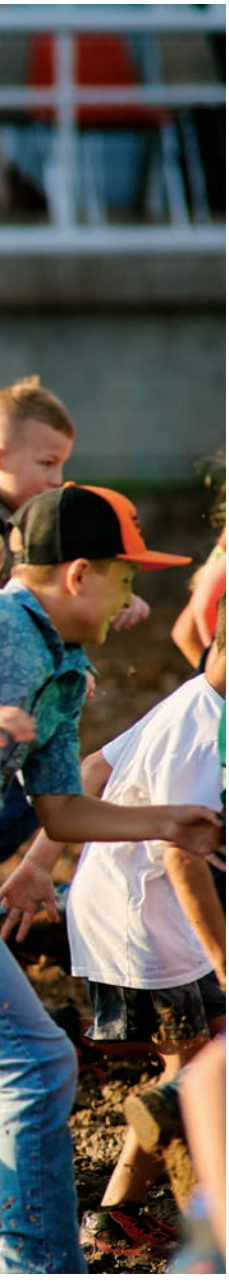
Want to check out traditional rodeo clowns and bullfighters in action? Texas provides plenty of opportunities in upcoming months.

Barrel clowns working in tandem with bullfighters is a standard feature at **Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association** events. The biggest PRCA rodeos in Texas occur in the early months of each year in San Angelo, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

This fall, **PRCA rodeos** worth checking out include Abilene (Sept. 10–18), Stephenville (Sept. 24–26), Waco (Oct. 8–16), and Lubbock (Nov. 5–6). *prorodeo.com*

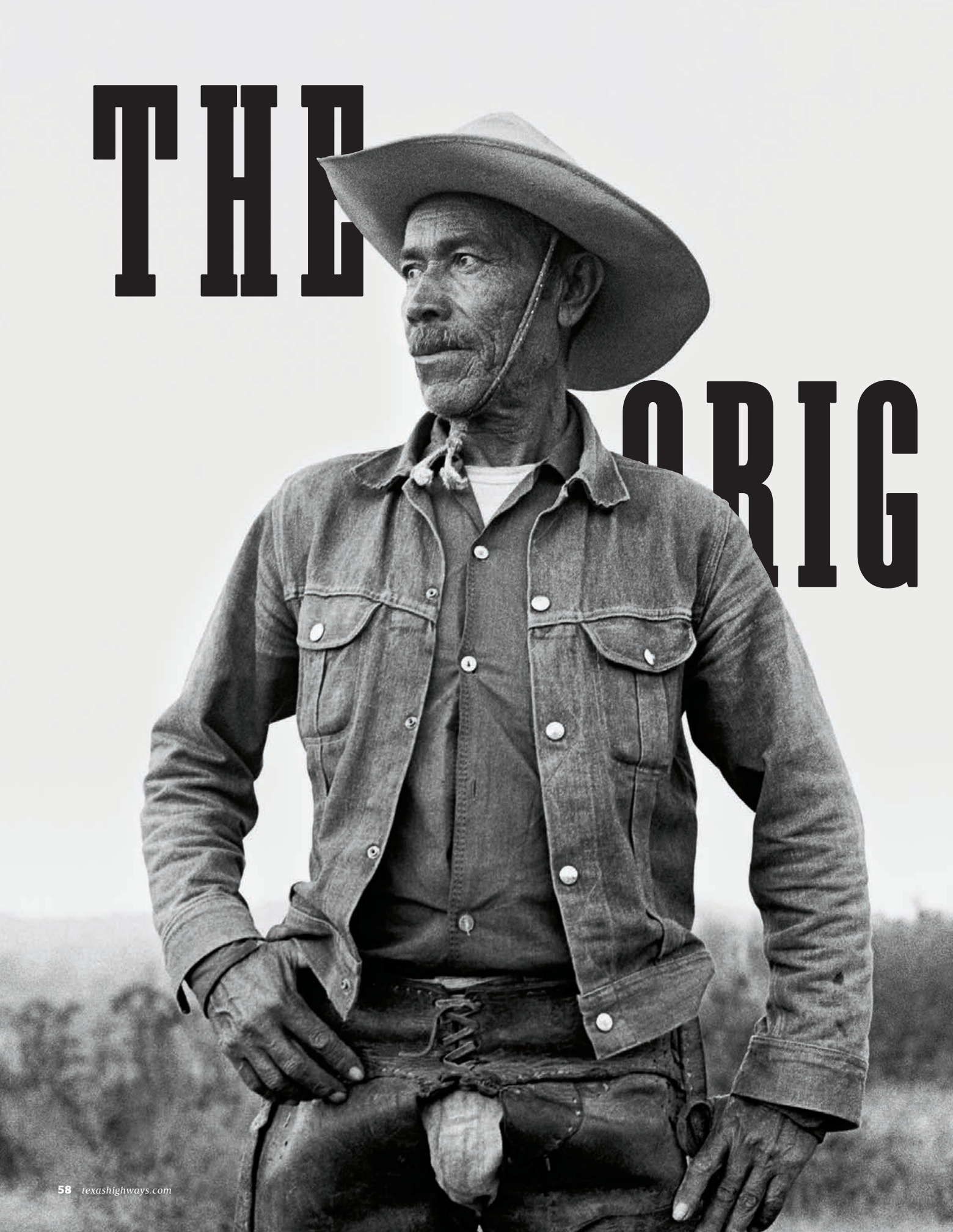
The Professional Bull Riders tour has several fall events scheduled in Texas: Belton (Sept. 4–5), San Antonio (Oct 2–3), and Llano (Oct. 16). *pbr.com*

Bullfighters Only (BFO) contests featuring bullfighters going head-to-head with Mexican fighting bulls are slated for Dallas (Oct. 9) and Waco (Oct. 17). *bullfightersonly.com*




Bullfighters

THE ORIG



INAL COWBOYS

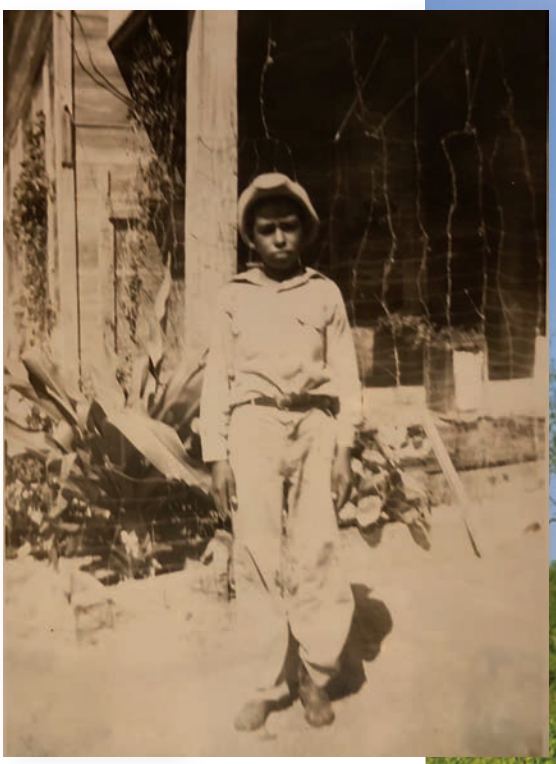
★

VAQUEROS PIONEERED THE TEXAS RANCHING INDUSTRY, BUT THEY'VE ALWAYS STOOD IN THE SHADOWS OF HISTORY

BY KATIE GUTIERREZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOEL SALCIDO
ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEVEN NOBLE

Photo: Courtesy The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University

SAMUEL BUENTELLO WAS 14 YEARS OLD



when he left the Rancho Nuevo in South Texas, the only home he'd ever known. In 1945, the road to nearby Hebbronville, a ranching hub 56 miles southeast of Laredo, wasn't much more than dirt. All Buentello had was a paper sack of belongings and his mother's tearful blessing. He had no money and no sense of what might come next, except work. Work was what he knew. Work was in his blood.

Buentello was a vaquero, a cattle worker whose horseback livestock-herding tradition was developed in Spain and perfected in Mexico before arriving in what would become South Texas in the 1700s. Vaqueros often lived with their families on the ranches they worked and were responsible for feeding, gathering, branding, castrating, and readying for market tens of thousands of cattle a year. Vaqueros were driving up to 20,000 head of cattle per year from Texas to Louisiana and Mississippi a century before Richard King of King Ranch began his legendary trail drives and the mythology of the American cowboy was born, according to historian Jim Hoy, who co-wrote the book *Vaqueros, Cowboys, and Buckaroos* with Lawrence Clayton and Jerald Underwood.

"The American cowboy, our great national folk hero, is recognized around the world as a symbol of our country," Hoy says. "Cowboys as we know them, however, would never have come into existence without the vaquero. They were the original cowboys."

Buentello learned every aspect of cattle work from his father, Pedro Buentello, who had learned from his own father in the hard-scrabble late 1800s. A tall, imposing man, Pedro Buentello worked for various ranches and Rodeo Hall of Fame calf roper Juan Salinas before becoming a caporal, or foreman, at the Rancho Nuevo.

Pedro Buentello was a strict father and mentor. When Buentello was 9 and a powerful horse threw him in the corral, Pedro Buentello ordered, "Vengase—p'arriba." *Come here—get up.* Buentello struggled off the dirt, mounting the horse again. For the second time, the horse lowered its head and arched its back, kicking its hind legs until Buentello flew off. "P'arriba," his father commanded. The third time the horse bucked him, Buentello couldn't get up. His pelvis was shattered, and he spent the next nine months in bed.

"Así fue el trabajo más antes," Buentello says, reflecting on his childhood. *That was the work back then.*

In those days, a day in the life of a vaquero began early and often ended in pain. In this part of South Texas the Spanish once called El Desierto de los Muertos, or The Desert of the Dead, the summer heat is like a blowtorch, and the land, thick with mesquite and cactus, can rip a rider's legs apart without the right protection. Yet if you ask any vaquero about his way of life—especially if he is old enough to remember rounding up cattle without the help of trucks or trailers or helicopters, without cell phones or GPS, when the men slept for months beneath saddle blankets underneath the stars—he'll tell you he wouldn't have it any other way.

The roots of the vaquero tradition are long and tangled within complex histories of colonialism. They extend from Northern Africa with the Muslim conquests in the mid-seventh century to the 16th century, when Hernán Cortés brought the first horses to what would become Mexico and Gregorio

Photo: Courtesy Samuel Buentello

OPENING SPREAD: Refugio "Cuco" Salas, a *remudero*, in 1971. THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: Samuel Buentello around the time he left the Rancho Nuevo at 14; Marty Alegria and his horse, Cinch.

de Villalobos followed with the first cattle. To the Mayans, the mounted Spaniards were a terrifying sight: half man, half beast. After the conquests, the Spanish maintained their dominance by decreeing that any Native American caught riding a horse would be put to death.

But the livestock multiplied quickly and needed keepers. At first, Cortés and the conquistadores, who considered themselves above such labor, assigned the work to their Moorish slaves. According to *Vaqueros, Cowboys, and Buckaroos*, these enslaved Black Muslim men were the first true vaqueros—a term that translates to "cow men"—in North America. As the need for vaqueros grew, the Spanish law changed to allow Native Americans to ride horses, but only for work and only without saddles, which were the mark of gentlemen. Unwittingly, the Spanish ensured that Native Americans became superior horsemen.

By the 17th century, descendants of the Spanish and Native Americans (and, one can speculate, the Moors) were working cattle using Spanish methods. This was the first generation of Mexican vaqueros—men who had first ridden horses on cradles strapped to their mothers' backs, learning as children how to snare small game using ropes made from native fibers such as maguey, *lechuguilla*, and horsehair. Later, they made *lazos* out of cowhide, a tedious process of drying the skins, cutting them into strings, and weaving a rope of six strands up to 60 feet.

They adopted sombreros for shade and leather chaparreras (later abbreviated as chaps) to protect their legs from thorny brush. They could throw *la reata* (later Anglicized as "lariat") to catch the front feet

★

A.D. 711: The Moors, Black Muslim North Africans descended from the Arabs and Berbers, sweep into Spain on their swift desert horses—*mesteños*, later called mustangs—influencing Spanish horse culture and ruling much of the Iberian Peninsula for the next 800 years.

Buentello at the Santa Fe Ranch near Linn.

★

1492: Following the bloody Spanish Inquisition, during which 300,000 Moors were expelled from Spain, the last of the Moors are driven out, and the "Christian knights" of the Inquisition become conquistadores.

Buentello (left) is escorted by Efrain Rodriguez, his friend of more than 50 years.

1519: Hernán Cortés lands on the western shores of what will become Mexico, introducing the first horses—mustangs—in this part of North America since their extinction there around 10,000 years earlier.

or heels of an animal. They developed the technique called *dar la vuelta* ("dallying") in which they wrapped the rope around the saddle horn instead of tying it off hard and fast. Both methods required immense skill to avoid getting dragged or maimed when roping wild cattle from the back of a horse galloping through the open frontier.

By the early 18th century, vaqueros were driving herds of cattle, horses, and sheep alongside Spanish missionaries to settle beyond the Rio Grande. But Texas—then still a part of Mexico—was harsh and unforgiving, marred by violence, heat, and drought. In the 1830s, to increase population, the Mexican government encouraged migration from the United States, setting the stage for Texas' battle for independence and eventual annexation.

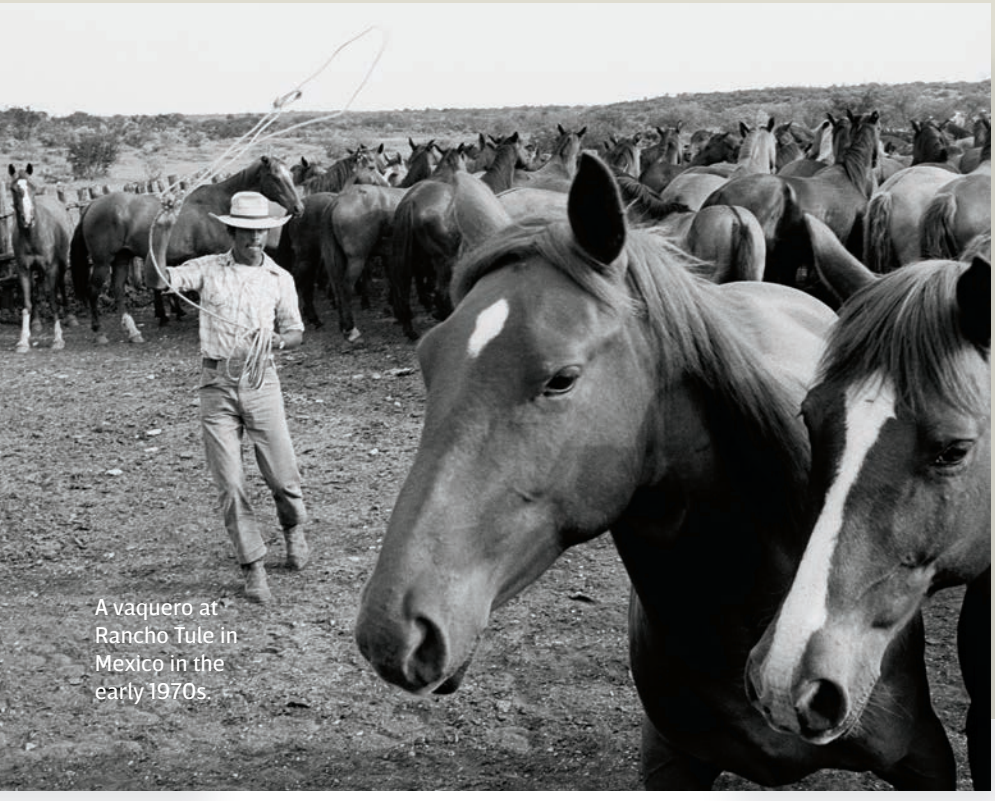
Enter Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy, friends and business partners who had served together in the U.S.-Mexico War and saw an opportunity in Texas' herds of wild Longhorns, descended from the original Spanish breeds. Together and separately, they began to acquire huge swaths of South Texas acreage in the 1850s and '60s, which would become the venerable King and Kenedy ranches, according to *Voices from the Wild Horse Desert* by Jane Clements Monday and Betty Bailey Colley.

At the time, though, King and Kenedy had no livestock experience. While Kenedy eventually hired vaqueros from the Rio Grande area, King traveled to Cruillas, Tamaulipas, in northern Mexico, offering the entire impoverished town housing and jobs for life if they would move back with him to his ranch. About 100 families accepted. Over time, they adopted the moniker of *Kineños*, or King's men. (On the Kenedy Ranch, they were *Kenedeños*.)

The Mexican vaqueros taught King and Kenedy everything: how to work cattle and train horses, how to cull and keep the best stock, how to build a ranch. King and Kenedy trusted the vaqueros implicitly and took paternalistic responsibility for their well-being, and the vaqueros rewarded that trust with their loyalty. With his Kineños, King went on to drive tens of thousands of head of cattle to northern markets, helping establish the American ranching industry and building the most successful beef-producing operation in the U.S.

Even after breaking his pelvis at 9, Buentello loved riding and roping. By 14 he was a highly skilled vaquero. But after a falling out with one of the Rancho Nuevo's *patrones*, Buentello left. He hitched a ride to Hebbronville, once ranked as the largest cattle-shipping area in the country, where he was let out on a corner in front of the Texas Theater. Across the street, a Bruni rancher named Floyd Billings was pumping gas into his big black car when he saw the boy. "Do you need money?" he called. No, Buentello said. He only needed work.

Billings drove Buentello 50 miles to King Ranch. By the mid-1940s, the ranch totaled 825,000 acres and more than 20,000 head of cattle. It had advanced methods of clearing brush, perfected the American quarter horse, and bred a line of thoroughbreds. King Ranch had become legendary, and the



A vaquero at Rancho Tule in Mexico in the early 1970s.

★

1521: Gregorio de Villalobos brings cattle, which will crossbreed to become the Texas Longhorn, from the West Indies to Mexico. As the cattle and horses multiply, a workforce of commoners, or paisanos, becomes necessary. The first vaquero in North America is thought to be Hernán Cortés' Moorish slave, followed by Native Americans who learned to ride without saddles.

Kineños were the vaquero elite.

Two Kineños in crisp blue uniforms and cowboy hats greeted Buentello as the July sun beat down on his dusty khaki shirt and narrow-brimmed felt hat. The men looked at him skeptically. He was small and skinny for his age, more like a child than a man.

"A ver si pasas un test," they said. *Let's see if you pass a test.*

They took him to a corral, inspecting Buentello as he saddled and bridled a sleek dark stallion. "Ten cuidado," they warned. *Be careful.* "He's fast." Buentello slipped his feet into the stirrups, knees high as he guided the horse to a trot, then a full gallop. "Suéltalo!" the men shouted. *Let it go*! Buentello loosened the reins while retaining complete control, land and sky blurring as the horse flew at full speed. The Kineños told him he'd start work in the morning.

Each day, Buentello rose when the sky was still pierced with stars. His job was to exercise 15 horses before noon. He didn't realize it, but these were King Ranch's thoroughbreds, including Assault. The horse would, the very next year, in 1946, become the seventh Triple Crown racing champion in U.S. history. To date, Assault is the only Texas-bred horse to accomplish this feat.

The best vaqueros have "cow sense," the innate understanding of the way cattle think and move. They are masters of the lasso and ride as one with a horse. But one of the most important qualities of a good vaquero is the willingness to teach his skills.

In 1968, Samuel Torres Sr. was a caporal at Alta Vista, the headquarters of the original Jones family ranches that once spanned more than 300,000 acres between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River. His sons, Samuel Torres Jr. (Sammy) and Gerardo Torres (Jerry), lived for the days he would take them to roundups. They'd pick out their clothes and put their spurs on their boots, and by 3 a.m. they'd be heading to the camp house a mile or two from the main ranch. The cook had coffee going, plus beans, *pan de campo*, and tortillas. While they ate, they could hear the distant thundering of horses. The remuda was coming in, up to 300 horses being brought from the pasture by two *remuderos*, brothers Felipe and Miguel Piñon. By 5:30, the men—and boys—were saddling up.

On most large ranches, roundups happened twice a year, once in the spring to brand, vaccinate, and castrate calves and colts; and once in the fall to cull cattle for market. Torres Sr. was a patient teacher, not just to his sons but to other young vaqueros, including Jose "Red" García Jr. García was used to learning on the job. The first time he castrated a horse, a vaquero had told him, "You've seen enough—now do it." But Torres Sr. took 18-year-old García under his wing, explaining which two vaqueros to keep in sight and which landmarks to look out for to maintain his position when driving cattle.

Marty Alegria, who was born on King Ranch in 1966, also benefited from mentorship by legendary vaqueros. Chief among them were Kineños Alberto "Lolo" Treviño, whose ancestry goes back to the de la Garza family who owned the land before King purchased it; and Martín Mendietta, a fifth-generation Kineño and caporal. Alegria grew up in a Kineño colony of about 100 brick houses and spent weekends and school holidays alongside old vaqueros who would teach the children how to rope, ride, and break horses as well as how to read cows and people. Eventually, Alegria graduated to working big corridas with 30 other vaqueros, gathering thousands of head of cattle on pastures up to 10,000 acres.

The best thing Alegria learned in his 41-year career at King Ranch, he says, is

Photo: Courtesy The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University

Sammy Torres Jr. at his home in Hebbronville, with a photograph of his father, Samuel Torres Sr.

how to palpate cattle to check for pregnancy and ensure high-percentage calf crops each year. With intricate knowledge of the cow's reproductive system, Alegria can tell whether the animal is pregnant as early as 35 days after conception, when the embryo is only 9 to 10 millimeters long. Over the course of his career, he has palpated upwards of 280,000 head of cattle. Alegria's eagerness to pass his knowledge on to fellow vaqueros is how he measures his success. "I ain't gonna take this to my grave," he says.

Any conversation about the legacy of Texas vaqueros must contend with difficult truths. The first is vaqueros' general erasure from cowboy mythology. In her introduction to *Voices from the Wild Horse Desert*, Ana Carolina Castillo Crimm notes that a history of King Ranch published in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* in 1953, which describes the lives of the Anglo foremen in detail, neglects to mention the Kineños at all.

This isn't a coincidence. The Mexican Revolution, between 1910 and 1919, led to a spell of deadly anti-Mexican sentiment. The border became militarized, and the Texas Rangers grew from a small militia group to an official law enforcement agency that targeted "...both the 'Indian warrior' and the Mexican vaquero as enemies of white supremacy," historian Monica Muñoz Martinez writes in her book *The Injustice Never Leaves You*. National political cartoons portrayed Mexicans as revolutionaries and bandits, and this is how they came to be depicted in most Western literature and film, opposite the noble white American cowboy. Notable exceptions are the 1972 photo book *Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy* by Bill Wittliff, founder of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University; and the 1958 book *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* by the Texas folklorist Américo Paredes.

"Mexican vaqueros have largely been erased from Texas popular memory because they provide a picture of a Mexican that contrasts with racist depictions of them as unskilled, uneducated, dangerous, and a threat," Muñoz Martinez says. "To tell the history of the vaquero you also have to tell the history of a long effort to displace Mexicans from economic, cultural, and political power in South Texas."

To Muñoz Martinez's point, vaqueros have never been paid commensurate with their skill or the importance of their contributions to the cattle industry. "It's not going to make you rich," Alegria says. Indeed, in the 1940s, Pedro Buentello made $25 a month, one-eighth the median U.S. income. In the 1970s, García made $175 per month, one-fifth the median U.S. income, per the U.S. Census

★

Late 1690s–early 1700s: Mexican vaqueros—typically mestizo, or descended from Spaniards and Native Americans—drive herds of cattle and horses alongside Spanish missionaries and soldiers, establishing the first missions and ranches north of the Rio Grande.

FROM LEFT: Alegria near Premont; vaqueros at Rancho Tule in Mexico.

1854: After purchasing the 15,500-acre Rincón de Santa Gertrudis land grant and establishing King Ranch, steamboat captain Richard King travels to Cruillas, Mexico, and offers the expert vaqueros there housing, food, and jobs for life if they'll return with him to King Ranch. The vaqueros become known as *Kineños*, or King's men, and the Texas ranching industry is built with their labor.

Bureau. The most Buentello ever made was $1,200 a month in the 1980s. Until recently, there was no pension or retirement plan for vaqueros. They simply worked until the work changed. At King Ranch, when a vaquero got too old to ride horses, he would inspect fences or fill water barrels, chop wood or teach the children, like Alegria, and pass the tradition forward. Stories abound about vaqueros whose hearts gave out the day they could no longer work, as if broken by the loss of life on the range.

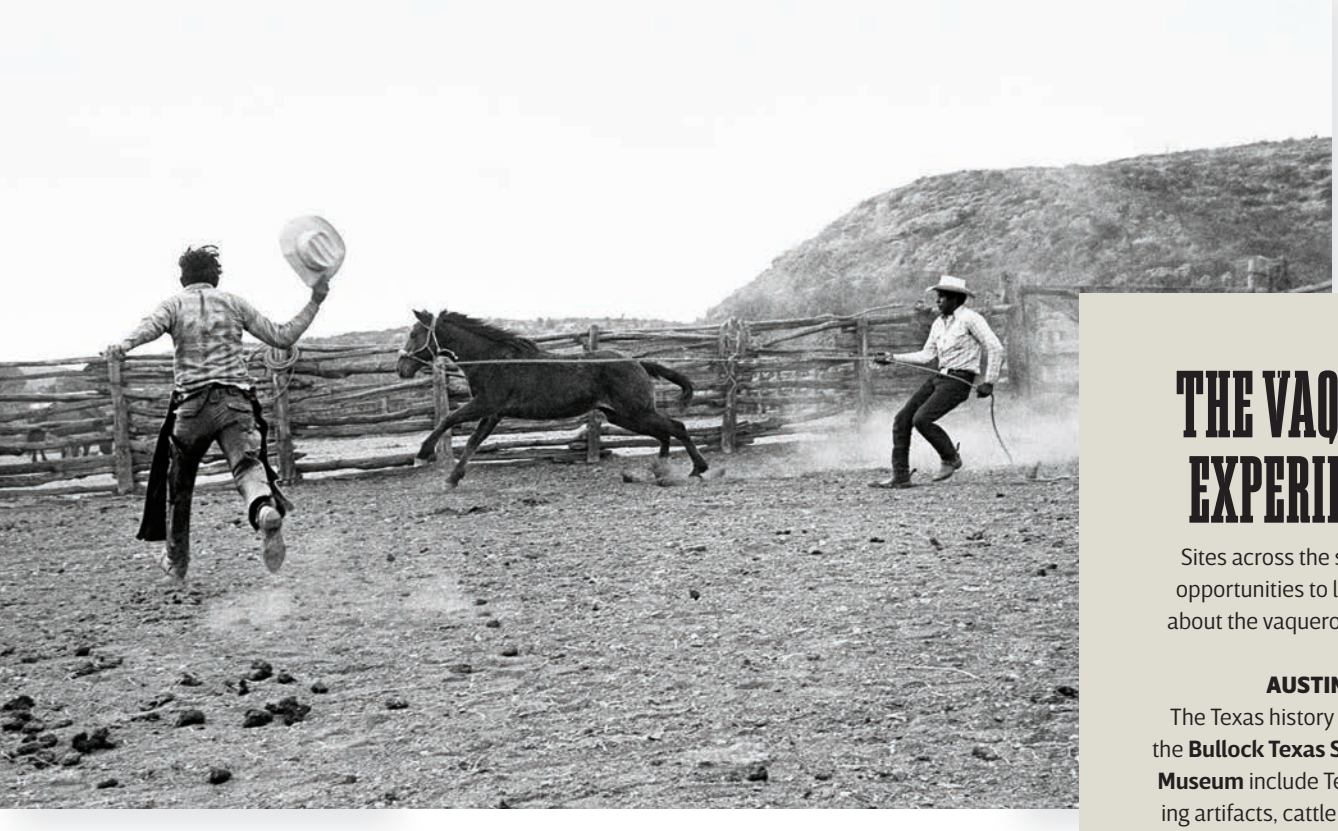
The model of lifelong work on a ranch began to change in the mid-1970s when helicopters started being used for roundups. Pilots were paired with old vaqueros and, without headphones to communicate, would rely on their body language for clues: If the vaquero winced or turned, the helicopter was getting too close or pushing too hard. Once the pilots learned how to herd cattle from the sky, they became known as helicopter cowboys. For $200 to $350 an hour, a helicopter might take half a day to gather a pasture that would take 30 vaqueros two days.

Mechanizing any process takes a human toll. Helicopters were one reason King Ranch eventually laid off or offered early retirement to more than half of its Kineños in the 1970s and '80s. Many of them had been born there and expected to die there. Across Texas, as helicopters, trucks, and trailers became the norm and younger men were drawn to an education or better pay in the oil fields, the number of vaqueros dwindled.

Today, ranches that once employed two dozen or so vaqueros might only have a half dozen. Knowledge of the old ways is disappearing along with them. Torres Jr. has tried to remedy that by founding the Vaqueros of South Texas, a Facebook group 9,000 members strong that posts pictures and stories of vaqueros who have long since passed. "My dad's skills never diminished," Torres Jr. says, "but his skills were no longer needed. There were very few ranchers who might have come and pat him on the back and said he did a good job. So, I figured now's a good time to recognize vaqueros for all the work they did and still do."

South Texas is usually sepia-tone and sunburned, but on the May day I visit Santa Fe Ranch, just north of Linn near Edinburg, everything is luxuriantly green after a recent rainfall. Scarlet-throated wild turkeys strut around, and cream- and tan-colored Charolais cattle graze the pasture alongside the mile of road leading to Mike East's home.

The East family is descended from the Kings, and Santa Fe Ranch used to be a part of King Ranch. East's story begins with



Moto Alegria, the accomplished vaquero (and Marty Alegria's great-great-uncle) who helped raise two generations of East children. Moto Alegria was a constant, protective presence who intervened if East's mother went to spank them. Once, Moto Alegria rigged up a harness for a tortoise out of a string and tied an empty shoebox for it to pull, a playful memory East treasures.

Black and white photos of vaqueros line East's hallway. There is Tiburcio Rodriguez, standing beside East's grandfather, father, aunt, and uncle, who crouch with their arms around dogs. Many years later, as an old man, Rodriguez still rode horseback to check on fences and windmills every day. East's grandmother would pour tequila into a cup and tell East, "Take this out to Tiburcio."

There is also Juan Molina, dust kicking up from his boots as he helps a young East and his father rope a horse they're about to castrate. And there, in a place of honor on the mantel, sits a plaque of gratitude from the family of Paublino "Polín" Silguero, who insisted on working until he took a fall in his 90s. Years later, when East visited him in the nursing home, Silguero's first question was how many vaqueros East still employed. (That answer, today, is seven.)

East tells me about Buentello—the boy who left home at 14 with only his shopping bag of belongings. After exercising King Ranch thoroughbreds for several years, Buentello worked for East's father before going on to train Arabian horses in Corpus Christi and eventually managing a ranch in the Rio Grande Valley. Now, at 90, Buentello might be the oldest living vaquero in South Texas.

When Buentello arrives for lunch, he is wearing a black plaid shirt, tooled leather belt, and jeans with a crisp iron crease. It's been more than 65 years since Buentello worked for East's father, but the warmth between the men transcends time.

"You were kicking rocks because you didn't want to go to school," Buentello tells East in Spanish, reminiscing about the year they met. "And Motito would tell you, 'You *have* to go to school, Mikey.'"

East smiles at the mention of Moto Alegria. "I wanted to be with the vaqueros," he says.

For the next two hours, Buentello and East talk about their tough upbringings and the men they knew—their escapades and heroics and deaths. Buentello's daughter, Magda Buentello-Vergara, has hired a videographer for the occasion. Buentello is the last of an age, and after all, it's always been up to vaqueros to pass down their own tales.

In a space between stories, Buentello reflects silently. "El tiempo se pasa," he says. *The time passes.*

THE VAQUERO EXPERIENCE

Sites across the state offer opportunities to learn more about the vaquero way of life.

AUSTIN

The Texas history galleries at the **Bullock Texas State History Museum** include Tejano ranching artifacts, cattle stories, and more. thestoryoftexas.com

HEBBRONVILLE

In November, Hebbronville—designated the "Vaquero Capital of Texas" by the state Legislature—holds the annual **Hebbronville Vaquero Festival**. facebook.com/vaquerofestival

Alta Vista Ranch, one of the original Jones family ranches, offers day trips and lodging. jones-altavistaranch.com

SAN ANTONIO

The **Briscoe Western Art Museum** showcases artifacts and sculptures representing the vaquero tradition and hosts a **National Day of the Cowboy** celebration each summer, honoring the contributions of cowboys, cowgirls, and vaqueros. briscoemuseum.org

The annual **San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo** in February presents an event entitled **Noche Del Vaquero**. sarodeo.com

Photo: Courtesy The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University

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PLATES

TEXAS-SHAPE chocolate truffles add cowboy panache to San Angelo's Cowboy-Up Chocolates.

Photo: Eric W. Pohl

Bean to Barn

A chocolate shop in San Angelo embraces the town's Wild West flair

By Becca Nelson Sankey

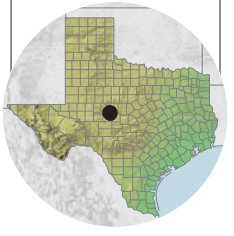
CHARLES AND MISTY Mullin—pictured with their daughter, Summer—craft treats like chocolate-covered peanut brittle (bottom right).

At Cowboy-Up Chocolates in San Angelo, Charles Mullin greets customers as "Wild West Charlie," a character who always wears boots and a cowboy hat. Mullin's alter ego is part of the charm of this quaint shop that has been open since 2008.

In 2019, Charles' wife, Misty Mullin, purchased Cowboy-Up Chocolates from its founder, James Crowder. A larger-than-life personality, Crowder gave wooden roses to each customer, along with a business card with Western axioms inscribed on the back. "Today I will do what others won't, so tomorrow I can accomplish what others can't," reads Charles' favorite.

Not only is the store's name fitting of the kitschy salesmanship and signature yellow rose- and Lone Star State-shape truffles inherited from Crowder, but it also pays homage to San Angelo's frontier history and the Mullins' can-do nature.

COWBOY-UP CHOCOLATES
2411 College Hills Blvd., San Angelo. 325-949-3248; cowboyupchocolates.com



The Mullins are not new to acquiring businesses. In 2015, a local beekeeper of four-plus decades asked them to take over his hives with the promise he'd teach them the ropes. "I see these as bird nests on the ground," Charles says of the opportunities. "Who doesn't like honey, and who doesn't like chocolate?"

Misty wasn't surprised at the enthusiasm with which Charles dove into the honey and chocolate businesses. "I'm kind of used to it," she says with a laugh. "I feel like he's always coming up with random ideas."

Charles has worked in the food indus-

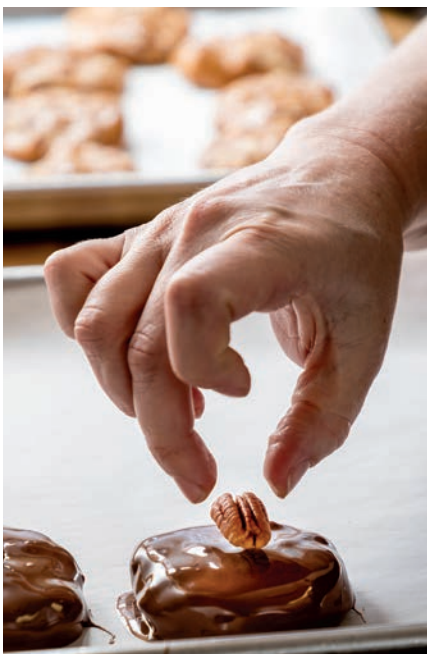
Photos: Eric W. Pohl

try for many years, including serving in local restaurants during college. But making chocolate presented a different challenge. “Chocolate is something beautiful, but it’s scientific—calculations, formulations, and temperature,” he says. “It’s a delicate dance.”

Gesturing to a shelf lined with bottles, Charles says, “We use Amoretti [a gourmet line of food oils] as our flavoring. We use high-quality heavy creams, high-quality chocolate. We’re pretty much using the best of the best for all of our chocolate.”

The spark for Cowboy-Up Chocolates started 30 years ago when Crowder made his Concho Caramel truffles as gifts for his clients when he was a realtor. He was in his 60s when he decided to open the business. In 2015, he won first place for new flavors at the International Chocolatiers Convention in New York City with his signature Almonds De Leche, a Southern-inspired white chocolate candy with roasted almonds and dulce de leche filling, sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. The Mullins trained with Crowder for about a year and still use most of his recipes, which burst from a binder they refer to as “the business bible.”

Cowboy-Up’s alcohol-infused Saloon Selection, which includes Irish cream and rum flavors, is Charles’ brainchild.

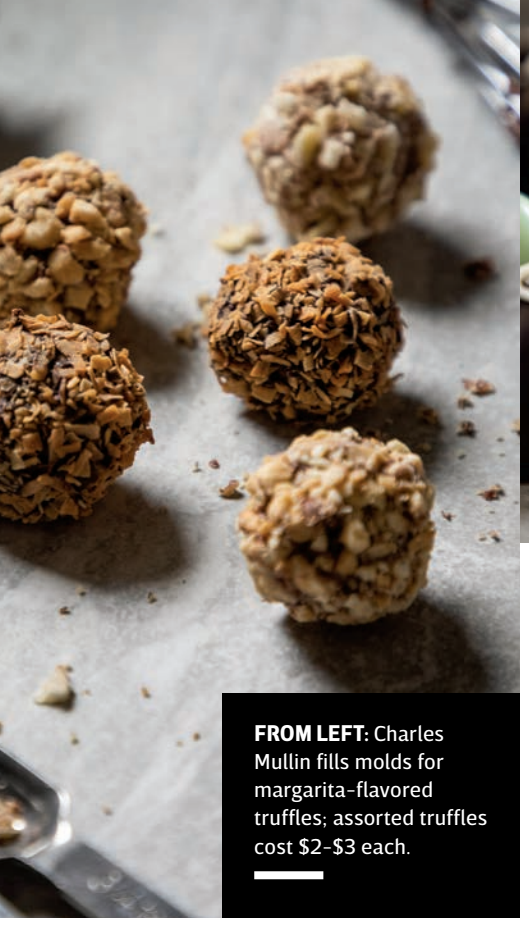


"When I thought of cowboys, I thought of the saloons, trail riding, and coming into town and having a whiskey," he says. "It's the heritage of the cowboys."

The establishment of Fort Concho in 1867 at the confluence of the North, Middle, and South Concho rivers first brought settlers to San Angelo, which was inhabited by the Comanche people at the time. In its early days, San Angelo could have been the setting for a Western movie. What is now the downtown area was once a rowdy center for gambling, bordellos, and saloons. A legend persists of underground tunnels spanning from building to building, secret passageways for townsmen to discreetly visit brothels, including the infamous Miss Hattie's Bordello.

"It was not a quality community in the late 1870s, early 1880s," says Bob Bluthardt, site manager of Fort Concho

Photos: Eric W. Pohl



FROM LEFT: Charles Mullin fills molds for margarita-flavored truffles; assorted truffles cost $2–$3 each.

National Historic Landmark. "Before 1882, the city was primarily serving the needs of the fort soldiers and the Buffalo soldiers. Ben Ficklin, to the south, was the community of the upstanding. In August of 1882, a flood wiped out Ben Ficklin. The county seat in Ben Ficklin moved here and the railroad came in 1888, securing the city's future, and the rest is history."

Even though selling chocolate is a much tamer affair than running an Old West saloon, Cowboy-Up still aims to give an impression of those freewheeling days with its sweets. "Tumbleweeds," for example, are white chocolate balls blended with coconut flakes; "Bronco Brittle" is peanut brittle with red pepper flakes; and "Texas Truffles" come in flavors like mesquite bean, chipotle pecan, and margarita.

Around the holidays, it's not unusual for Charles to make chocolate at the shop until the wee hours of the morning. "It's a love," he says. "It's a passion."

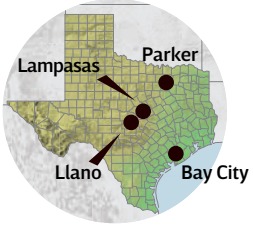
While the Mullins took a risk delving into an industry unfamiliar to them, they were always certain about their mission. "What made it easy for me to walk into this business was the ideology I have: pride in our state and our customers leaving happy," Charles says. "Chocolate is cheaper than a counselor, too."

Treats of the Trail

Taste true cowboy cuisine with these four chuckwagon experiences

By Susan L. Ebert

On the banks of the Llano River on an April day, I stroll among cooks in late-19th-century ranch attire. They tend to cast-iron skillets and Dutch ovens over crackling fires alongside their vintage chuckwagons. What looks like a living history exhibit at a museum is actually the Llano Chuckwagon Cook-off, an annual event that typically draws 1,000-plus attendees.



The competitors prepare feasts of meat, potatoes, gravy, bread, beans, and fruit cobbler the same way "cookies" did during cattle drives, which took place from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. Cookies managed the chuckwagons—covered wagons created to store and transport food and cooking equipment—and in addition to being responsible for all meals, worked on other tasks such as cutting hair and mending clothes.

Their legacies live on in modern chuckwagon experiences, which range from public competitions like the Llano cookoff to bespoke catering services for private parties. Aside from the novelty of dining al fresco near a roaring campfire, these affairs provide an education on the history of cattle drives and entertaining cowboy lore to savor with family and friends.

Llano Chuckwagon Cook-off

At this year's sold-out springtime event, 14 chuckwagons compete in an old-fashioned throwdown. The friendly banter between teams belies the seriousness with which these folks vie for honors. Chuckwagons are judged on authenticity on Friday, with each wagon displaying their vintage pots, tools, accessories, and clothing. Saturday morning, the campfires are lit, and each wagon prepares enough meat, beans, potatoes, bread, and dessert to feed 40 to 50 people, with judging in each category. When points are tallied, the year's overall winner is crowned.

The chuckwagons hail from towns across the state, including Glen Rose (Jewett Gap), Sinton (Ellis Cattle Company), Huntsville (3G Land and Cattle), Fort Davis (Moreland Wagon Shop), and points in between.

Every wagon has a tale to tell, and proud owners are happy to share theirs. Ellis Cattle Company's 1910 John Deere wagon has its original emblem. Owners Charles and Janice Ellis tell me John Deere once produced more than 30,000 such wagons.

When the moment of truth arrives at high noon on Saturday, I exchange my $20 meal ticket for a plate of Jewett Gap's grub: chicken-fried steak cooked to perfection, smoky campfire pinto beans, rustic mashed potatoes, buttery cornbread, and a scoop of Dutch-oven peach cobbler.

"I've been doing this for 40 years," says Jeff Laramore, a member of the Jewett Gap wagon. "Every cookoff is like a mini-vacation. It's so restorative to get back to the old ways."

I'm incredulous to learn that Jewett Gap didn't place among the winners, but judging by the enthusiasm with which the guests eat their respective wagons' dinners, first place and last place must be separated by no more than a mule's whisker.

First week of April. $20 for a meal ticket. 325-247-5354; llanochuckwagoncookoff.com

Photos: Kenny Braun

FROM LEFT: Sunrise at the Llano Chuckwagon Cook-off; peach cobbler from one of the chuckwagons in Llano.

Spread Oaks Ranch

Down on the midcoast near Bay City, the 5,500-acre Spread Oaks Ranch offers chef-prepared chuckwagon cuisine at its lodge nestled in the midst of a 500-head Brangus cow-and-calf operation. Guests must book the entire ranch for $8,000, which includes full use of all amenities, including the infinity-edge pool, sporting clays range, stocked bass lake, luxe chuckwagon dinner, and accommodations for up to 10 guests.

Most of the feast's ingredients hail from the ranch itself, including pastured poultry, Brangus beef, and house-cured hams and sausages. Fresh-picked organic fruits and vegetables from Spread Oaks' garden and greenhouse, along with seasonal foraged fare such as dewberries, elderberries, muscadine grapes, and pecans, round out the menu.

"When folks first come around the bend and see the chuckwagon set up near a towering, ancient oak with our chef roasting meat and tending steaming cauldrons over open cook fires, they're in awe," Hospitality Director Kim Singleton says. "It's visually stunning and like nothing they've ever experienced—like traveling back to a simpler time."

$8,000 rate for up to 10 guests, all-inclusive during the ranch's "social season," from March through October. 281-615 9562; spreadoaksranch.com

Southfork Ranch

For larger get-togethers, mosey up the trail to Southfork Ranch in Parker, the set of the long-running television series *Dallas*. A chuckwagon dinner for a minimum of 20 guests features a singing cowboy and a barbecue dinner with all the fixins. Choose brisket, chicken, or ribs to be served alongside traditional accompaniments of potato salad, coleslaw, beans, and fruit cobbler with whipped cream. You can upgrade the chuckwagon menu to feature fictional patriarch J.R. Ewing's favorite steak dinner and a s'mores dessert station. The Southfork cookout includes a complimentary tour of the Ewing mansion and museum.

Starts at $50 per person with a 20-person minimum.
972-442-7800 ext. 282; southforkranch.com

"When folks first come around the bend and see the chuckwagon set up near a towering, ancient oak with our chef roasting meat and tending steaming cauldrons over open cook fires, they're in awe."

FROM LEFT: Three-cheese skillet queso; Sandra Gammill-Julian at an event in Zephyr.

Rollin' Texas Style Chuckwagon

In 2008, chef Sandra Gammill-Julian fell in love with the chuckwagon concept. Over the next few years, she bought a nearly 130-year-old Mitchell chuckwagon; shuttered her Lampasas restaurant, Yumm Factory Café; and hit the road with her company, Rollin' Texas Style.

She hauls her chuckwagon throughout Texas and to neighboring states to cater a variety of private events, from weddings to family reunions. She offers a customizable menu for up to 100 guests that can include chicken-fried steak, bacon-wrapped pork loin, and bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

Gammill-Julian grew up just west of Lubbock, in Dora, New Mexico, and started cooking for the field hands on her parents' land as a young girl. Later, she rented commercial kitchens to cook for ranch hands before starting her own catering business in 1984. That led her to open the Yumm Factory Café in 2006 before going whole hog on chuckwagon cuisine in 2012.

"I'm in no way unique to preserving the old ways of cowboy cooking," Gammill-Julian says. "But I consider it such an honor to be able to do this, and at the same time, feed and nurture my passion for cooking."

Her specialties include appetizers such as the three-cheese skillet queso, with refried beans, cheese, grilled onions, jalapeños, sour cream, and queso fresco. Protein choices include hand-cut ribeye and New York strip steak; barbecue brisket, sausage, and chicken; and grilled, baked, or Southern-fried chicken. In addition to her New Mexican chile-infused peach cobbler, Gammill-Julian's "black-and-blue" cobbler of blackberries and blueberries makes for a mighty fine grand finale.

512-525-3550; rtschuckwagon.com

Photos: Kenny Braun

Kernels of Hope

Corn dodgers are the perfect snack for a cowboy—and his horse

By Lisa Bubert

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Corn dodgers with chili; cornmeal mixture thickens over heat; corn dodgers fry in a pan.

When professional horseman and cowboy Pete Lichau was growing up in 1970s Sonoma County, California, he idolized actor John Wayne.

Two of his favorite movies were *True Grit* and *Rooster Cogburn*, both Westerns that showed characters eating corn dodgers, a hush puppy–like snack.

"As a little cowboy kid, whatever John Wayne ate, I was gonna eat," Lichau says. So his mother dutifully recreated the on-screen treats. "That just elevated my mom to John Wayne status," Lichau recalls.

Corn dodgers originated as a survival food for pioneers during the Westward Expansion of the 1800s. They were made out of the only ingredients on hand in hard times—cornmeal, pork fat, salt, and water. They were fried in a cast-iron skillet or on a tine of a garden hoe and were used as sustenance for horses as well.

Lichau earned his spurs and first belt buckles in the 1980s by participating in bareback bronc riding competitions in Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, and Texas, until his professional rodeo career was cut short by a broken neck in 2014. Nowadays, he owns and operates Rose Gate Farm in Argyle,

Photos: Melanie Grizzel

RECIPE

Mother Lichau's Corn Dodgers

INGREDIENTS:

1 ¾ cups cornmeal

1 tablespoon firmly packed brown sugar

Pinch of salt

1 tablespoon of oil

DIRECTIONS:

Bring 2 ¾ cups of water to a boil in a pot on the stove. Mix the cornmeal, 1 cup of cold water, the brown sugar, and the salt together in a bowl. Add to the boiling water. Stir continuously until thickened, about 15 minutes. Pour into a greased loaf pan and chill overnight. Turn out on a cutting board and cut into ½-inch squares. Fry squares in the oil in a cast-iron skillet until browned (4 to 5 minutes on each side). Serve with gravy, butter, or syrup. Makes 25.

"As a little cowboy kid, whatever John Wayne ate, I was gonna eat."

a suburb of Fort Worth, where he teaches riding lessons and horsemanship.

Lichau left California when he was 19 to join the rodeo circuit. He wrote letters to his mother on the backs of his rodeo numbers and included a list of towns and dates. Wherever he ended up, he would head over to the post office, where a care package from his mother always awaited him. The bundles included fresh socks, underwear, and sometimes saltines and sardines. "She sent me those for inspiration," he jokes, remembering their acrid taste. Without fail, there was also a batch of corn dodgers.

Perfect for both the cowboy and the horse, the dodgers were strategically placed by Lichau on his truck's dashboard to help them harden up and last longer. "The harder they got, the slower I ate them," he says, which was good since he didn't have much food to go around at the time.

His mother has passed on, but Lichau feels her presence in his work ethic as a horseman and his mindset as a cowboy.

"She wasn't going to send me money," he says, remembering those early lean days. "Because I was a cowboy now, and cowboys eat corn dodgers."

PETE LICHAU cooks on his Argyle ranch.

Photo: Melanie Grizzel

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JOEL NELSON, one of Texas' most esteemed cowboy poets, and his horse Stony on the Anchor Ranch in Alpine.

'From Hide and Horn'

Cowboy poetry evolves while honoring agricultural traditions

By Andy Hedges

Other states were carved or born,
Texas grew from hide and horn.
Other states are long or wide,
Texas is a shaggy hide,
Dripping blood and crumpled hair,
Some fat giant flung it there,
Laid the head where valleys drain,
Stretched its rump along the plain.
Other soil is full of stones,
Texans plow up cattle bones.
—Berta Hart Nance

Photo: E. Dan Klepper

With her poem "Cattle," Albany teacher Berta Hart Nance won the Texan Prize at The Poetry Society of Texas' annual competition in 1931. "For several years this prize has been won with a poem on cotton," Nance wrote several years later. "I determined to try what I could do with cattle as a subject."

Nance, who grew up on a ranch in Shackelford County, was onto something: Her poem tapped into the cultural tradition of cowboy poetry, and to this day, poets recite "Cattle" on stages across Texas and the West.

Cowboy poetry was born in the trail-driving era of the 1870s, when cowboys herded Longhorns to northern railheads on such well-known routes as the Chisholm and Goodnight-Loving trails. To stave off boredom, cowboys wrote poetry about their work and repurposed old folk songs to fit their surroundings.

"Along the way, a variety of poem and song traditions were recalled, modified, reinvented, and regionalized," Utah professor David Stanley wrote in his 2000 book, *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, "particularly the verbal art of sailors and soldiers, largely English and Irish in origin, which combined with the songs and hollers of black cowboys and the *corrido* tradition of the vaqueros."

These poems and songs quickly entered the oral tradition of cowboy poetry. The authors were forgotten, but their words lived on, scuffed and polished through the years as they drifted from one reciter to the next. What's remarkable is that working cowboys still know these poems, and beginning with a revival of the genre in the 1980s, cowboy poets have been gathering in places like Alpine, Lubbock, Fort Worth, and Abilene to share their works, both traditional and new.

"At the first gathering that I attended, I was knocked out by, first of all, the honesty of the work I was hearing," recalls Andy Wilkinson, a poet and songwriter from Lubbock. "I was also very, very much taken by the fact that this was all acoustic. It was like a folk club of the '50s, only it was in the '90s."

The first person to collect cowboy poems and songs was Jack Thorp, a cowboy originally from New York City. In 1889, Thorp rode into a camp of Black cowpunchers in eastern New Mexico and heard one of the cowboys singing and playing banjo.

"The campfire flickered and fell," Thorp wrote in *Pardner of the Wind*, a book of his true stories published in 1945, five years after his death. "I knew there would be maybe half a dozen men sprawled around it, their day's riding done, supper over, and a banjo-pickin' cowboy to tell a story under the stars."

Transfixed, Thorp quit his job with the Bar W Ranch the next day to embark on a yearlong, 1,500-mile song-collecting journey across Texas and New Mexico. The result was his 1908 book, *Songs of the Cowboys*. It included Thorp's composition "Little Joe the Wrangler," which would become one of the best-loved cowboy songs of all time. Thorp's book was followed in 1910 by Texan John Lomax's monumental collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, which included an introduction by President Theodore Roosevelt.

Lomax's subsequent collection, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, was published in 1919 and included the poem "Lasca." Although many consider "Lasca" to be the definitive Texas poem, it was actually written by Englishman Frank Desprez, who spent three years on a Texas ranch in the 1870s before returning to London. *The Montana Stockgrowers Journal* first published "Lasca" in the 1880s, and it spread throughout the West. It recounts the tale of a Mexican beauty who saved her lover's life in a stampede:

COWBOY POETRY originated around campfires like this one in an unlabeled photo from the state archives.

I want free life and I want fresh air;
And I sigh for the canter after the cattle,
The crack of the whips like shots
in battle,
The melee of horns and hoofs and heads
That wars and wrangles and scatters
and spreads;
The green beneath and the blue above,
And dash and danger, and life
and love—
And Lasca!

"Lasca" became so popular that in 1919 *The Newark Advocate* in Ohio reported, "There is scarcely an American who has not read the poem, recited it, or committed it to memory." And in 1951, Mabel Major, a Southwestern scholar at TCU, said, "If you want to tell a native Texan from a refugee from the United States—that is, if he is over 50—just ask him if he knows 'Lasca.'"

With the advent of B Western films and Hollywood singing cowboys in the 1930s, cowboy poetry seemed to fade away. The nation was urbanizing, and poetry recitations gave way to new forms of entertainment. Authentic cowboy songs were overshadowed by country hits from Nashville. Then, in the 1980s, folklorists doing fieldwork on Western ranches discovered cowboy poetry was actually alive and well. Cowboys were still reciting and singing old classics, and ranch folks were writing poetry about their lives.

In 1985, the first Cowboy Poetry Gathering was held in Elko, Nevada, bringing together bona fide cowboy poets, reciters, and singers. Red Steagall, the beloved musician and poet who lives in Azle, attended the first Elko gathering. "I fell in love with that art form," says Steagall, who in 1991 was named the "Official Cowboy Poet of Texas" by the Texas Legislature. "I realized that those are the people that I want to talk to. So, for five years I didn't write another song. I wrote nothing but poetry."

Not long after the first Elko gathering, Nevada buckaroo Waddie Mitchell performed on *The Tonight Show*, and regional gatherings started taking shape across the West. In West Texas, the Texas Cowboy Poetry Gathering held its inaugural event at Sul Ross State University in Alpine in 1987.

Texas cowpunchers with a gift for poetry began coming out of the woodwork. Larry McWhorter, the son of cowboy and Texas Playboys fiddler Frankie McWhorter, grew up in the Texas Panhandle and wrote poetry that pulled from his own experiences and those of old-timers. McWhorter captured the code of the Texas cowboy in words like:

The other boys called him
an old windbag
His tales just an old man's prattle.
But there was a time he could do
a day's work
On horses we couldn't saddle.

On the Trail of Cowboy Poetry in Texas

There's something about hearing the spoken word from the stage that brings poetry to life. I've been attending and performing at cowboy poetry gatherings in Texas for over 25 years, hooked early on by the energy and camaraderie between the reciters and the audience. Here are my favorite gatherings in the state. *—A.H.*

The Red Steagall Cowboy Gathering at the Stockyards in Fort Worth. Oct. 22–24. **redsteagallcowboygathering.com**

Texas Hill Country Cowboy Gathering in Fredericksburg. Oct. 23. **texashillcountrycowboygathering.com**

The Lone Star Cowboy Poetry Gathering at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. Feb. 18–19. **lonestarcowboypoetry.com**

Cowboy Poetry Under the Stars at the Western Heritage Classic in Abilene. Held annually in May. **westernheritageclassic.com**

Photo: Courtesy Texas Library and Archives Commission (Image No. 19750705483)

Joel Nelson was working on the 06 Ranch near Alpine when he read about the first Elko gathering in *Western Horseman* magazine. Nelson had loved poetry since he was a boy and tried his hand at writing verse during his service in the Vietnam War.

"I started hearing a little bit of poetry from that first gathering and I thought, 'I can do better than that,'" recalls Nelson, who helped found the Alpine gathering and has become one of the most respected voices in the genre.

Another Texas poet who garnered national attention is the late Buck Ramsey, of Amarillo. Ramsey cowboyed in his youth but was confined to a wheelchair after a horse wreck left him paralyzed from the waist down. When he discovered cowboy poetry gatherings, he began reviving old songs and writing poems that challenged the traditional forms while staying true to cowboy lingo.

The 1990s and early 2000s were prolific years for cowboy poetry in Texas, although we lost several of the genre's leading lights. Ramsey and Larry McWhorter both passed away—in 1998 and 2003, respectively—but not before cementing a legacy of written words that will be recited for generations. Nelson, who now runs the Anchor Ranch near Alpine, continues to write original poetry and recite classics, including "Anthem," the venerated poem by his friend Ramsey:

And in the morning I was riding
Out through the breaks of that long plain,
And leather creaking in the quieting
Would sound with trot and trot again.
I lived in time with horse hoof falling;
I listened well and heard the calling
The earth, my mother, bade to me,
Though I would still ride wild and free.
And as I flew out on the morning,
Before the bird, before the dawn
I was the poem, I was the song.
My heart would beat the world
a warning—
Those horsemen now rode all with me,
And we were good, and we were free.

And so the tradition continues.

IT'S ISLAND TIME
EST. 1839
GALVESTON, TX

Coastal Distancing on GALVESTON ISLAND

One of the best things about escaping to an island is the freedom of being surrounded by nature. With sea birds in the air, sand dunes by your feet and miles of coastal landscapes from beach to bay, Galveston Island allows you to have a remote getaway where you can finally breathe easy.

Just a 50-mile drive from Houston, the island's 32-mile-coast is lined with thousands of beach houses, vacation rentals, hotel rooms and socially distant activities for your next trip — whether you're eager to explore or just in need of a refreshing change of scenery from the comfort of your home away from home.

Go beyond the beach and take in Galveston's storied history — an attraction itself. Visit historic sites like the 1892 Bishop's Palace, the1895 Moody Mansion and The Bryan Museum. Along the harbor, downtown Galveston's majestic Victorian architecture creates the perfect backdrop for perusing the district's many boutiques, antique shops and coastal-inspired art galleries.

The iconic Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier is a modern take on the Galveston amusement park piers of old. Thrill rides, a midway and a kids' area make this a must-see attraction. Also not to be missed is Moody Gardens. The 242-acre complex features a rainforest, aquarium and discovery pyramid, plus 3D, 4D and even 5D experiences.

With everything Galveston has to offer, the best part is there's no pressure to see and do it all at once. When you're here, you're on Island Time. For more information, head to **visitgalveston.com**.

San Luis Resort, Spa & Conference Center

SanLuisResort.com
800.392.5937

Your paradise awaits you at The San Luis Resort on Galveston Island. The opulent, 16-story hotel offers premier accommodations and amenities, breathtaking Gulf views and unmatched personalized service. Guests can choose from an array of accommodations, including VIP floors, the elite "Club 10" and The Villas, five luxurious suites offering the relaxed charm of a secluded hideaway. Take time to relax and rejuvenate with top shelf pampering at the Spa San Luis. Enjoy a stroll on the beach or soak up the sun with a cocktail at our trendy pool, The Cove. For added privacy, opt for a cabana, exclusively available for rental to overnight guests. In addition to sumptuous amenities, enjoy an endless variety of resort activities, events and entertainment perfect for couples, families and groups! For additional lodging on the resort, visit Hilton Galveston Island Resort and Holiday Inn Resort Galveston- On The Beach for an endless array of entertainment and activities fun for all ages.

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Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier

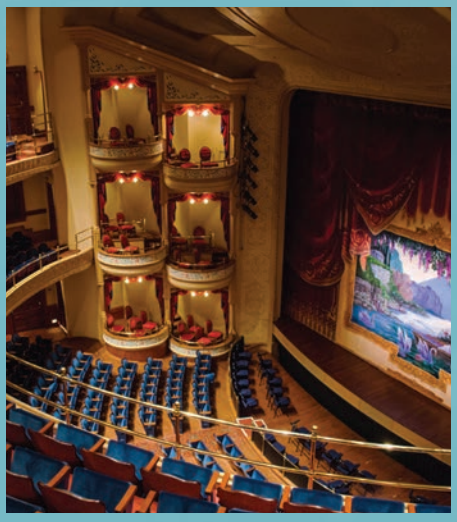
Be adventurous at PleasurePier.com
409.766.4950

Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier is a Gulf Coast destination featuring family-oriented attractions, including 17 rides, midway games, waterfront dining and retail shops. From the extreme steel coaster, the Iron Shark to our 5D Theater Ride, kids of all ages will relish in the excitement.

Ocean Star Offshore Drilling Rig & Museum

OceanStarOEC.com
409.766.7827

Welcome aboard!
Embark on an industrial-strength discovery in a modern museum setting. The Ocean Star offers the opportunity to physically enter the world of the offshore industry. So much of our modern society relies on oil and things made from it. At the Ocean Star Museum, learn how hydrocarbons form and what it takes to extract them from the earth — from people and processes to tools and technologies. Open seven days a week for self-guided tours, step aboard for a unique learning adventure. Discount rates are available for groups.



The Grand 1894 Opera House

Get your entertainment at TheGrand.com
800.821.1894

The Grand 1894 Opera House presents a year-round performing arts schedule featuring stars of stage and screen, Broadway hits, music, dance, comedy and more. This historic venue, the official opera house of the State of Texas, offers no seat further than 70 feet from the stage with an intimate view of performances that can't be matched! The Grand is also available for meetings, weddings, and corporate events, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ship to Shore

www.galvestonhistory.org/shiptoshore

Galveston's historic immigration story comes alive with a new experience at Galveston Historical Foundation's Galveston Historic Seaport. Ship To Shore allows visitors to follow in the footsteps of the early immigrants, from the long sea voyage with its mix of hardships and wonders to the hustle and bustle arriving in the 1880s at Galveston, one of the busiest ports and booming cities in the United States and known as the "Ellis Island of the South."

The Ship To Shore experience creates a series of sequential experiential spaces alternating hands-on and innovative interactive learning with immersive experiences, all based on authentic and documented personal stories of immigrants landing in Galveston. The experience also utilizes a digital membership card that personalizes the experience to the visitor giving an authentic and new story each time they visit.

Historic Downtown Galveston

DowntownGalveston.org

The Historic Downtown Strand Seaport is a 70-block district located along Galveston's harbor. Once known as "The Wall Street of the South," this charming historic district is famous for its majestic iron-front buildings that house unique boutiques, coastal-inspired art galleries, antique shops, museums, restaurants and other entertaining attractions, including dolphin tours. Be sure to visit The Strand, Pier 21, Postoffice Street and West Market to fully experience everything downtown offers.

EVENTS

Kolaches? Czech!

Caldwell's Kolache Festival hosts a historic bake-off

Beginning in the 1880s, Czechs settled throughout Burleson County in large numbers. In 1984, descendents of those settlers interested in preserving their heritage gathered for a kolache bake-off, competing with their best recipes for the pastry made from sweet yeast dough and a fruit or cheese filling. The contest, held in the Central Texas town of Caldwell, grew into a full-blown festival, and in 1989, the state Legislature dubbed Caldwell the "Kolache Capital of Texas," cementing the town's pastry pride.

This year's 36th annual Kolache Festival, held in downtown Caldwell on Sept. 11, features live polka music, the Kolache Krunch 5K, a quilt show, hundreds of arts and crafts vendors, and more than 40 food vendors. Three downtown restaurants serve authentic Czech dishes, and bakeries crank out countless kolaches. "We sell hundreds and hundreds of dozens of kolaches," festival director Janice Easter says.

Those wanting their fill of kolaches can compete in the kolache-eating contest, but the main event is still the kolache baking contest, now called the State of Texas Kolache Bake Show. —*Amanda Ogle*

Kolache Festival
Sept. 11
100 W. Buck St., Caldwell
facebook.com/kolachefestival

BIG BEND COUNTRY

MARFA
Trans-Pecos Festival of Music + Love
Sept. 22-26
Convene at El Cosmico for a weekend of live music, sandlot baseball, workshops, vendors, and more in Marfa. *El Cosmico, 802 S. Highland Ave. 432-729-1950; elcosmico.com/event/trans-pecos-festival-of-music-love-2021*

GULF COAST

BRAZORIA
Southern Quilters Show and Market
Sept. 11
More than 50 vendors set up to display and sell handmade quilts. Ribbons and cash prizes are awarded for top quilts. *Brazoria Civic Center, 202 W. Smith St. 979-824-0455; brazoriahf.org*

FREEPORT
Texas Navy Day
Sept. 18
Created to educate residents about Texas naval history, Texas Navy Day includes a program that provides information about the role of the navy in the Texas Revolution and other monumental moments, and it commemorates historic events with reenactors. *Freeport Historical Museum, 311 E. Park Ave. 979-233-0066; freeport.tx.us*

GALVESTON
Galveston Island Shrimp Festival
Sept. 24-25
Featuring some of the best shrimp gumbo the Gulf Coast has to offer, this year's festival serves up a seafood cookoff, gumbo tasting, Lil' Shrimps Parade, live music, a children's area, and a Strand merchant walkabout. *Saengerfest Park, 23rd and Strand streets. 409-770-0999; galvestonshrimpfestival.com*

LAKE JACKSON
Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza
Sept. 18, 25
During the peak of Ruby-throated hummingbird migration, see a live hummingbird banding and symbolically adopt a hummingbird. There are activities for kids, live animals in nature booths, and a hummingbird- and butterfly-plant sale. *Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, 299 SH 332 W. 979-480-0999; gcbo.org/connect/xtreme-hummingbird-xtravaganza*

PORT ARANSAS
Anglers on Wheels
Sept. 17-18
This free fishing trip for people with disabilities and their loved ones takes anglers to the bays and flats around Port Aransas. Texas Parks and Wildlife provides a free fishing license for all event participants. The fishing boat is a converted ferry boat that is completely wheelchair accessible and covered to protect against the sun. Reservations required. *Woody's Sports Center, 136 W. Cotter Ave. 210-749-0004; ditwtexas.org/anglers-on-wheels.html*

PORT ARANSAS
Port A Live Music Fest
Sept. 17-19
The music festival features a concert by Jimmy Buffett cover band the Landsharks. The kick-off concert is followed by live music around town and a Margarita and Taco Trail all weekend long. *Palmilla Golf Resort, 132 Palmilla Beach Drive. 361-749-5919; visitportaransas.com*

ROCKPORT
HummerBird Celebration
Sept. 16-19
The annual festival for all things hummingbird features a reception, workshops, the Hummer Mall, bus and boat tours, exhibits, bird banding, and lectures presented by world-renowned experts. Events are held throughout Aransas County. *Various locations. 361-729-6445; rockport-fulton.org/hb*

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND
Sandcastle Days
Sept. 27-Oct. 3
Master sand sculptors Walter McDonald and Lucinda Wierenga started Sandcastle Days to demonstrate the sculpting qualities of South Padre Island sand and the

Photo: J. Griffis Smith

FREE EVENTS GUIDE For a free subscription to the quarterly *Texas Highways* Events Calendar, go to **texashighways.com/eventsubscription**

importance of protecting coastal shores. This is a qualifying event for the World Championships of Sand Sculpting. There are also live music, vendors, and food. *Clayton's Beach Bar and Grill, 6900 Padre Blvd. 956-761-6433; sandcastledays.com*

SURFSIDE BEACH
Sunday Market in the Park
Sept. 12
Discover fresh foods and other goods at this market full of various vendors in Surfside Beach. *Surfside Bird and Butterfly Trail, 418 Parkview Drive. 979-233-1531; surfsidetx.org*

TOMBALL
GroovFest
Sept. 18
The 36th annual all-Volkswagen show has over a hundred restored Volkswagen Beetles, Karmann Ghias, and air-conditioned vans from the 1960s—all competing for over 20 prizes. Modern Volkswagens are also welcome. Live entertainment comes from '60s-inspired cover bands. *Tomball Train Depot, 201 S. Elm St. 281-351-7222; nhvwclub.wordpress.com/page*

HILL COUNTRY

AUSTIN
Blended Festival
Sept. 10-11
This wine-centric event features a 100-foot-long wine tent, a wellness lounge, culinary stations and celebrity chef appearances, craft cocktails, and live music. *Long Center for the Performing Arts, 701 W. Riverside Drive. blendedfestival.com*

AUSTIN
Zilker Relays
Sept. 10
In this 10-mile team race, each participant runs a 2.5 mile loop. The event features a festival, drinks, and music. *Zilker Park, 2207 Lou Neff Road. 512-974-6700; zilkerrelays.com*

AUSTIN
Pecan Street Festival
Sept. 18-19
This free arts festival takes place in downtown Austin's Sixth Street Historic District. The festival attracts hundreds of local and national artisans offering original handcrafted creations in a variety of mediums, from metal, wood, fiber, clay, leather, glass, and stone to repurposed materials of all kinds. *Historic Sixth Street, 501 Old Pecan St. 512-478-0098; pecanstreetfestival.org*

AUSTIN
Moontower Comedy Festival
Sept. 22-25
Established in 2011, this festival offers a diverse mix of comedians, podcast hosts, and performers from around the world, as well as a lineup of local and regional talent. *Various locations. 512-472-5470; moontowercomedyfest.com*

BANDERA
Round-Up
Sept. 4-5
This weekend of Western events includes a cowboy market with live music; gunslinging shows; Longhorn cattle; and a Saturday night ranch rodeo followed by a Sunday night all-women's ranch rodeo with mutton busting at the historic Mansfield Park. *Various locations. 830-796-3045; banderaroundup.com*

BOERNE
Bierfest
Sept. 25
A ticket gets attendees 10 pours in a sampling stein from a choice of more than 25 Texas craft breweries. There's also food, live music, games, art displays, and an auction of beer-related art from professional artists. *The AgriCultural Museum and Arts Center, 102 City Park Road. 210-445-1080; theagricultural.org/boerne-bierfest*

FREDERICKSBURG
Fall Celebration
Sept. 25
At this annual festival at Wildseed Farms, find a wide selection of pumpkins and fall décor items, live music, pumpkin painting, food and drink, and other fall-themed entertainment. *Wildseed Farms, 100 Legacy Drive. 800-848-0078; wildseedfarms.com*

LAKEHILLS
Medina Lake Cajun Festival
Sept. 25
The 40th annual festival brings the food, music, and culture of Louisiana to the Texas Hill Country. Dance to Cajun and zydeco bands, enjoy authentic Cajun food, and sample gumbos in the Great Gumbo Cookoff. Treats include crawfish pies, jambalaya, fried catfish and shrimp, and bread pudding with whiskey sauce. *Lakehills Community Center, 11225 Park Road 37. 830-460-0600; cajunfestival-medinalake.com*

LAMPASAS
Lampasas Beer Barn LTX Barbecue Fest
Sept. 10-11
This state-championship-sanctioned barbecue competition includes a $7,500 guaranteed payout. In addition to the cookoff, there is a Kids' 'Que Cookoff and a cornhole tournament. *Lampasas County Youth Livestock Barn, 283 US 183 N. 512-556-5172; lampasaschamber.org*

NEW BRAUNFELS
Comal County Fair and Rodeo
Sept. 22-26
The parade down Seguin Street is on Friday. Other festivities include the Fair Queen Contest, carnival, antique tractor pull, a barbecue cookoff, live music, and kids' events such as stick-horse races, a pig-wrangler contest, mutton busting, and the kids' rodeo clown contest. *Comal County Fairgrounds, 701 E. Common St. 830-625-1505; comalcountyfair.org*

NEW BRAUNFELS
River Revival Music Fest
Sept. 23-26
Splice Records presents the seventh annual River Revival Music Fest, featuring three days of camping, music, and adventures along the banks of the Guadalupe River. *KL Ranch Camp, 5455 River Road. riverrevival.net*

TAYLOR
Taylor SPJST Barbecue Cookoff
Sept. 24-25
The competition includes various meats, sauce, and bean categories. Bring your appetite to this event on the Texas Barbecue Trail. *SPJST Hall, 5025 FM 619. 512-365-1110; facebook.com/taylorspjst*

UVALDE
Palomino Fest and Pro Rodeo
Sept. 2-5
This event showcases a diverse culture and musical heritage in southwest Texas. Over 20,000 guests attend the event for carnival fun, concerts, a rodeo, and parade. *Uvalde County Fairplex, 215 Veterans Lane. 830-591-9040; palominofest.com*

PANHANDLE PLAINS

ABILENE
West Texas Fair and Rodeo
Sept. 10-18
This event includes the PRCA rodeo, Carnival Americana, concerts, pig races, and livestock shows. *Taylor County Expo Center, 1700 SH 36. 325-795-6700; taylorcountyexpocenter.com*

ABILENE
Gay Pride Parade—Denim and Diamonds
Sept. 25
Put on your boots and head downtown to this Pride event presented by the Abilene Pride Alliance. Festivities include floats, a marching band, horses from the Dallas Gay Rodeo Association, a young-adult art show, face paintings, vendor booths, and food trucks. *Downtown Abilene. abipride.com*

AMARILLO
Tri-State Fair and Rodeo
Sept. 17-25
This is the largest annual family event in the Texas Panhandle. Fairgoers enjoy fun festivities including rides, games, a PRCA rodeo, livestock shows, concerts, and delicious fair food. *Amarillo Tri-State Exposition, 3301 SE 10th Ave. 806-376-7767; tristatefair.com*

COLEMAN
Dove Fest
Sept. 4
Indulge in all-you-can-eat catfish with all the trimmings. Paid admission makes you eligible for the door-prize drawings. There are guns and other prizes to be given away. *Bill Franklin Center, 13152 SH 206. 325-625-2163; colemantexas.org*

LUBBOCK
National Cowboy Symposium
Sept. 10-12
Celebrate Western heritage and cowboy culture with musical entertainers, poetry and storytelling, a Western authors panel, film and movie seminars, Youth Wild West Day, horse handling demonstrations, a parade, Native American activities and presentations, a chuckwagon cookoff, and exhibits of Western artworks and merchandise. *Lubbock Memorial Civic Center, 1501 Mac Davis Lane. 806-775-2242; cowboy.org*

PINEY WOODS

HUNTSVILLE
Antique Show
Sept. 18-19
More than 75 dealers from across the U.S. offer a wide array of antiques and collectibles, vintage items, furniture, and turquoise and silver jewelry. *Walker County Fairgrounds, 3925 SH 30 W. 936-661-2545; huntsvilleantiqueshow.com*

LONGVIEW
HomeBierFest
Sept. 18
Longview's biggest beer festival and homebrew competition features German-inspired beers crafted by area homebrewers. *Maude Cobb Convention Center, 100 Grand Blvd. 903-237-1230*

TYLER
Texas Rose Classic
Sept. 15-19
See a horse show that consists of show jumpers, working hunters, and hunt seat equitation. Concessions are available on the grounds. *Texas Rose Horse Park, 14078 SH 110 N. 903-882-8696; texasrosehorsepark.com*

PRAIRIES AND LAKES

BELTON
Bacon, Blues and Brews
Sept. 24-25
Featuring bacon, live music, and

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beer, this festival kicks off with food trucks. The bacon cookoff, where teams compete with bacon-inspired dishes, is Saturday. Vendors are onsite selling cold beer throughout the event. *Courthouse Square. 254-933-5849; seebelton.com*

BRENHAM
Washington County Fair
Sept. 11-18
The Washington County Fair is the oldest county fair held in Texas. Enjoy concerts, rodeos, livestock shows, arts and craft shows, special attractions, a carnival, and commercial exhibits. *Washington County Expo Center, 1305 E. Blue Bell Road. 979-836-4112; washingtoncofair.com*

CUERO
Weekend in Olde DeWitt
Sept. 25-26
DeWitt County's history comes to life in downtown Cuero, all in celebration of its founding in 1846. Enjoy storytelling, music, dance performances, chuckwagon demonstrations, a farmers market, living history presentations, and a Sunday picnic. *Downtown Cuero, Main Street. 361-275-2112*

DALLAS
State Fair of Texas
Sept. 24-Oct. 17
The fair celebrates all things Texas with daily attractions and activities including the Texas Auto Show, live music, a nightly starlight parade, and Big Tex greeting visitors. *Fair Park, 3921 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. 214-565-9931; bigtex.com*

MCKINNEY
Oktoberfest
Sept. 24-26
Join in for a full weekend of German-themed fun in historic downtown McKinney. Enjoy German food, domestic and imported beers, live music, and games. *Downtown McKinney, 111 N. Tennessee St. 972-547-2660; mckinneytexas.org/664/oktoberfest*

MESQUITE
Guts and Gory Zombie Run
Sept. 18
Race through the woods of Camp Rorie with a team, compete in challenges, and try to survive the zombie horde. Obstacles and missions test strength, speed, problem-solving, and teamwork. *Camp Rorie Galloway, 3100 Lawson Road. 972-216-6260; cityofmesquite.com/1885/guts-and-gory-zombie-run-run*

DON'T SEE YOUR EVENT?
If you think your event might be of interest to *Texas Highways* readers, submit your information at **texashighways.com/submitevent**

NOCONA
Wheels and Grills Cookoff
Sept. 17-18
Camp and cook at this two-day competition featuring horseshoe and cornhole tournaments and a classic car show. *115 W. Walnut St. 940-825-3526; nocona.org/events*

SHERMAN
Hispanic Heritage Festival
Sept. 11
The Hispanic Heritage Council of Texoma hosts this festival that celebrates Hispanic heritage with live music, food vendors, and cultural experiences. *Sherman Municipal Grounds, 405 N. Rusk St. 903-892-7230; shermantx.org*

SHERMAN
Celtic Festival and Highland Games
Sept. 25-26
Come to the Sherman Celtic Festival and Highland Games for Celtic dancing, the Viking Village, Scottish clans, cultural exhibits, competitive games, and lots of entertainment. *Pecan Grove West Park, 3200 Canyon Creek Drive. 903-892-7230; shermancelticfest.com*

WEST
Westfest
Sept. 3-5
Labor Day weekend brings a salute to Czech heritage with a festival featuring live music, entertainment, authentic food and beverages, a kolache-eating contest, the Miss Westfest contest, a parade, Kolache 5K, a carnival, and a polka Mass. *West Fair and Rodeo Grounds, 1110 S. Main St. 254-826-5058; westfest.com*

SOUTH TEXAS PLAINS

SAN ANTONIO
Limitless! Five Women Reshape Contemporary Art
Through Sept. 19
This exhibition offers installations by female artists Martine Gutierrez, Letitia Huckaby, Yayoi Kusama, Sandy Skoglund, and Jennifer Steinkamp. These artists demonstrate their creativity with artworks ranging from floor-to-ceiling art and video installations to an Infinity Mirror Room. *The McNay, 6000 N. New Braunfels Ave. 210-824-5368; mcnayart.org*

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Graham

The hidden "hill country"

BY CHET GARNER

Most travelers are familiar with the Hill Country located west of Austin, but many don't know about the second, hidden hill country that lies west of Fort Worth. This rolling terrain not only features some of the prettiest land in the state, but it also lays claim to Lone Star legends and hearty plates of Texan cuisine.

Graham Downtown Square

This bustling district encompasses four square blocks. In the Old Post Office Museum & Art Center you'll find sculptures, spurs, and murals that pay homage to Graham's cowboy past. Step through "The Arch," a stone doorway that's the only thing left of the 1884 courthouse. And when your belly starts rumbling, head into Marlene's at the Big Chill, serving up breakfast and lunch that could satisfy any rancher and his crew. I recommend the Philly cheese omelet.

Fort Belknap

This historic fort, established in 1851, teaches lessons in frontier life. The museum occupies the old commissary building and tells the story of the clash between native Comanche and Kiowa citizens and settlers trying to control the land. This is also near where the famous Goodnight-Loving Trail started, the cattle trail that inspired the book and TV miniseries *Lonesome Dove*. Museum staff sometimes parade the grounds in full military regalia and fire the historic cannon in memory of those who served.

Wildcatter Ranch

If you want to live the cowboy life with a bit of luxury, this 1,100-acre ranch is just your speed. Hop on a guided horseback ride and take in panoramic views of the Brazos River. The ranch also boasts accommodations like a Western-themed hotel, cabin suites, and a restaurant. Since every cowboy needs to be quick on the trigger and good with cattle, I recommend a skeet-shooting or cattle-driving lesson led by staff.

Possum Kingdom Lake

When you need a break from the heat, take a dip in this scenic lake. You can wade in at places like Possum Kingdom State Park, or you can plunge off the lake's famous cliffs as long as they're 20 feet or shorter. Just don't jump from the top of "Hell's Gate," a rock entrance to a popular cove. The two towering cliffs that flank the Gate are over 50 feet high and only used by professional cliff divers.

Brothers Smokehouse

Whether you have a hankering for barbecue, burgers, or a perfectly prepared filet mignon, brothers-in-law Allen Dixon and Chris Holland can set you up. Dixon cut his chops at Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House and now serves up quality cuts with a side of small-town charm. The smokehouse is also famous for experimenting in the kitchen and serving delectable specials like seared scallops or braised pork shank. Come hungry and save room for homemade banana pudding.

So whether you follow my footsteps or forge your own path, I hope to see you on the road.

Chet Garner is the host of The Daytripper® *travel show on PBS. To view the Graham episode visit thedaytripper.com. Follow along on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @chettripper.*

OPEN ROAD | continued from Page 21

on Dallas trollies alone to see "the picture show" downtown. Perhaps their disinterest in things like the rodeo stemmed from seeing enough of hardscrabble Texas life.

I wanted my son to have a sense of belonging to Texas' singular history, perhaps even a little bit of a Western fantasy that whispered the possibility for adventure and freedom in a way our current lives in Dallas do not. He didn't grow up like me, running through neighbors' fields, picking wildflowers, and feeding apples to horses at a friend's ranch. Born in Fort Worth and raised in Dallas, his games are more regulated—Little League Baseball or Topgolf or the all-consuming Minecraft with friends on his Nintendo Switch. I wanted him to have a bit of the old-fashioned magic only the rodeo could provide.

The big day arrived on Jan. 12, 2018. By then, I had informed pretty much every person I knew that Townes would be mutton busting—friends, family, colleagues, the bank teller, our server at Torchy's Tacos. It was bitterly cold, but that didn't stop Townes' "girlfriend" from kindergarten, his babysitter and her family, my parents, and his dad from braving the arctic winds to attend. Still, despite his numerous fans, Townes seemed a bit uncertain.

We explained what he'd be doing and had even discussed strategy with him: "Grab its fur and hang on really, really tight! Try to maintain your center of balance!" Townes shrugged us off. What did we know about riding sheep? Still, we rained praise and encouragement, trying to pep him up for his grand performance. We also promised him a windfall of junk food and carnival games post-rodeo.

His dad and I gathered in front of Will Rogers Coliseum, its magnificent art-deco tower standing sentinel over Fort Worth, before heading into the arena. We checked in with the mutton busting folks so Townes could pick up his ensemble—long-sleeved event T-shirt, red chaps, black vest, and helmet. Decked out like a mini-Tuff Hedeman, Townes led us to our seats up in the nosebleed section, where we would watch the first half of the show before escorting the kiddo down into the action.

I noticed for the first time how old and rough around the edges the building was. (Two years later, the rodeo would move to the new Dickies Arena.) But I didn't care. I was high on excitement, buying a doodad that spun and lit up for Townes to wave around. I took a thousand pictures. Eventually, my usually patient son grew annoyed. "Momma, stop!"

I remember the exact feeling of walking hand in hand with my son onto the arena floor. It was the first time I'd seen the coliseum from that view, and the packed house seemed oddly intimate, small even, like many childhood places do when you return as an adult. My boots sank several inches into the red dirt with every step as we made our way to two tiny rodeo chutes. We got in line behind the other parents, equally gleeful but a bit nervous, like we were waiting on a promising blind date to arrive. We watched as a dad in a button-up shirt lifted his daughter into the chute, setting her down on the sheep as a rodeo official looked on. Then *bam*! The chute door opened and the sheep took off like a shot in the dark, all spindly legs and shaggy fur, the little girl holding on for dear life.

When I sent in my son's application for mutton busting, I was signing him up for a type of Texas heritage that my grandmother had boasted about—tall tales of grit and humor with a bit of the absurd added in for flair.

Townes, his dad, and I watched, stock-still, as the sheep raced the length of the arena before the girl fell off. A rodeo clown ran to get her, lifting her high above his shoulders as the crowd whooped and hollered its approval. Townes turned to me. "Mom," he said, hesitating, clearly nervous. "You got this, buddy," I replied, and gave him a gentle push from behind, a ridiculous parenting moment my ex-husband captured in a photo.

I stood back so I could film the entire event on my phone. Townes' father lifted him up into the chute, and I lost sight of him. The next part happened so fast that I am forever grateful for the video. The chute opened, and nothing happened. At first. Then, the sheep burst forth, my little boy wrapped around him, trying hard to stay on. After what couldn't even have been a full second, he slid right off, landing in the soft earth. I watched him lift his head, saw the red sand pour out of his helmet before his dad rushed to grab him.

Townes was a bit stunned, but when it came time to pose for photos with the bull riders, he whispered, "I am a real cowboy," as if he couldn't believe it. He left positively beaming, holding his trophy and the special Western-style belt buckle awarded to all riders. We met his kindergarten friend outside, and in lieu of embarrassment, he yelled, "Did you see me fall off? It was awesome!" And off we went for funnel cakes.

Townes has never worn his special mutton busting belt buckle, but his trophy sits proudly on a shelf in his room. That piece of hardware has made an appearance at four years' worth of school show and tells, and it looks a little worse for wear. A photo hangs in our hallway of my son indelicately sliding off a moving sheep. "That's me!" he'll tell friends who come over for play dates. We still watch the video with regularity, my mother laughing until she cries. Sometimes, when I'm putting Townes to bed after we read a chapter of *Harry Potter* and he cycles through his endless litany of existential questions—Would you rather be a werewolf or vampire? Where was I before I was born? Do you think lobsters dream?—he'll spot the photo on the wall outside his room and ask me if I remember him mutton busting.

"I do," I say. "Do you?"

"Totally," he replies. "It was magic."

Let's Ride!

Silvano Alves and the Brazilian connection to America's top bull-riding circuit

By W.K. Stratton

If you're a rodeo fan, the first thing to catch your eye about Brazilian-born bull rider Silvano Alves is his height. He stands 5 feet, 10 inches, which conventional wisdom would tell you is too tall to be good at riding bucking bulls or broncs. Most rough-stock riders are shorter, compact men with low centers of gravity that give them a balance advantage. But the 33-year-old Alves competes in the Professional Bull Riders circuit, which has been bucking traditional rodeo notions for more than 25 years. The PBR, as it's known, showcases the best bull riders riding the strongest bulls in rodeo's most popular event. Alves, a soft-spoken three-time world champion, is among the PBR's rough-and-tumble elite.

Products of Brazil's ranching culture, cowboys like Alves have been dominant in American bull riding ever since Adriano Morães won the first-ever PBR world championship in 1994. All told, Brazilians have won 11 world titles in the PBR's 27 years, with José Vitor Leme claiming the 2020 crown. As of late July, eight of the top 15 riders were Brazilian, including Alves. Alves grew up in the agricultural community of Pilar do Sul in the state of São Paulo. But now he and his family live in Decatur, northwest of Fort Worth. Rooted in Texas' storied cattle-drive past, Decatur is a popular home base for rodeo competitors because of its proximity to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and its small-town atmosphere. It's where Alves intends to make his home for the long term.

"I'd go to bull-riding events, and I'd stand behind the chutes and watch how the best riders did it. I'd practice what I saw them do. I became a professional bull rider when I was 13."

***TH:** Why do you ride bulls?*

SA: I started to ride bulls because people in my family in Brazil were riders. My grandfather was a bronc rider, and my dad was a bull rider. Both my grandpa and my dad farmed and ranched. My grandpa broke horses, and my dad started riding bulls as a second job. In Brazil, there's not much money, you know? So my dad would do his work on farms and ranches then ride bulls for extra money. Bull riding is a big sport in Brazil now. It's professional with riders who

Illustration: Peter Strain

compete full time. But not back then. It used to be contests among farm and ranch cowboys.

***TH:** Did your dad teach you how to ride bulls?*
SA: A little bit, but not much. I mostly learned by myself. I watched DVDs, films, videos, and then I'd try it myself on the farm by riding calves in the pen. I started teaching myself what to do to stay on when I was 8 or 9 years old. Then I'd go to bull-riding events, and I'd stand behind the chutes and watch how the best riders did it. I'd practice what I saw them do. I became a professional bull rider when I was 13. I never participated in any other sports growing up, just ranch roping a little bit, which is a little different from what you see at American rodeos. But for me, it was always bull riding.

***TH:** Is there much difference between bulls in Brazil and the ones you ride at PBR events?*
SA: Bulls in Brazil are bigger, like a Brahma. But they're not fast like the bulls here. The PBR bulls are much harder to ride. They have more up-and-down movements and are stronger. They can jump high and change direction really quickly. They'll spin to one side, then go back to the other side. Riding them is very difficult.

***TH:** Why have Brazilian bull riders been so successful in the PBR?*
SA: They live the dream of coming to the United States to compete against the best. It's not just bull riders from Brazil but other countries too. [At present, riders from the U.S., Brazil, Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Guatemala compete in PBR.] In Brazil, though, people are humble and work hard. They don't have too much money. So they work hard at their job to get as good as possible so they can have more money. That's how it is for Brazilian bull riders too. They're determined to be the best. Then they can come to the United States and make a better life for themselves and their families. Adriano [Morães] helped me and other bull riders from Brazil get started here.

***TH:** How popular is bull riding in Brazil?*
SA: Now, bull riding is very popular in Brazil. People will even come to the U.S. to go to the finals. Back in Brazil, they stream events and record rides on DVR. I go back to Brazil about one time a year to see my mom and dad. When I go home, it's like I'm one of those soccer guys. People recognize me.

***TH:** What's a typical week like for you?*
SA: I work at my place outside Decatur. I have some horses and a couple of [live] bucking bulls I use for practice. I also have a steer for roping. I go to the gym to work out and stretch. I take the kids to school and do stuff with them. Fridays I leave to travel to PBR events. I get back on Sunday nights or Monday mornings. If I stay healthy and am at 100%, I'll do maybe 35 events a year.

***TH:** Have you had many injuries?*
SA: No, not many. But I had two bad ones. My first was in 2016 in Idaho, and I broke my hip. And in 2019, a bull stepped on my kidney while I was in Missouri. I had to have surgeries for both injuries. I had two screws put into my hip. Then I had to have an operation on my kidney, but luckily, I didn't lose it. I still have both kidneys.

***TH:** Why did you decide to live in Texas and in Decatur particularly? A lot of PBR and other rodeo people live there.*
SA: The first time I came to the U.S., I had a friend who lived in Texas, and he said I could stay with him at his home for a couple of weeks. So I did. I liked being here. As for Decatur, it is close to DFW Airport, just 45 minutes away on US 287 and then Texas 114. It's a small town. I don't like big cities—too much traffic, too many people. There are a lot of other bull riders who live here in Decatur for the same reasons I do.

***TH:** When did you buy your place there?*
SA: I first saw it in 2010 [the year Alves was PBR rookie of the year] and wanted to buy it. But I didn't have the money. They talked to me about my credit and getting a loan, but I didn't want to do that. I said I had an event the next week. If I did good there, I would come back and buy it. The realtor said, 'Well, OK, but there are other people interested in it. It might be sold to someone else in another week.' So I went to Vegas, to the finals, and I won something like $230,000. I came back on Sunday. On Monday morning, I called the lady and asked if she'd sold it, and she said no. I paid her cash for it.

***TH:** Do you think you'll stay in Texas after you retire?*
SA: I think so. I want to stay here in the United States because of my kids. My daughter is 12, and my son is 10. They were both born in Brazil, but they came to America when they were very small. They've grown up here. They'll finish school here then go on to university. So I'll stay here for them, for my family.

***TH:** You're 33 now, typically near the end of a bull-riding career. How much longer are you going to ride?*
SA: A couple of more years. No longer than that, but a couple of years, probably. I don't think about what comes next because I want to focus on riding bulls.

***TH:** Long enough to give you a chance to become the first rider to win four PBR world championships?*
SA: Yes sir!

The Professional Bull Riders season includes events in Belton Sept. 4–5 and San Antonio Oct. 2–3. The PBR World Finals will be held Nov. 3–7 in Las Vegas. pbr.com

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VINTAGE

BY JAC DARSNEK, TRACES OF TEXAS

The Bull-Dogger

CIRCA 1900

Famed rodeo cowboy Bill Pickett was born in 1870 in the community of Jenks Branch, on the border of Travis and Williamson counties. After attending school through fifth grade, he worked as a cowboy in the Taylor area and observed that a herding dog could subdue a bull by biting through its upper lip. He taught himself the risky trick, which amazed spectators and landed him a job in Wild West shows traveling the U.S., Mexico, Canada, and England. Pickett's innovation, dubbed "bulldogging," evolved over time into the popular rodeo event known as steer wrestling. Pickett is also credited with being the first Black cowboy movie star, appearing in 1921's *Crimson Skull* and 1922's *The Bull-Dogger*. Pickett was friends with Western film stars Will Rogers and Tom Mix, both of whom he instructed in the art of cowboying. Tragically, Pickett died in 1932 at age 61 after a horse kicked him in the head. He's buried on the 101 Ranch near Ponca City, Oklahoma, where he had lived for about 20 years.

Know of any fascinating vintage Texas photographs? Send copies or ideas to ***tracesoftxphotos@gmail.com.***

Photo: Public Domain

Raider Power IN THE LBK

Mark your calendars for a weekend getaway to Raiderland to cheer on the Red Raiders at Jones AT&T Stadium this fall! From the nation's top brewpub, The Brewery LBK, to accommodations in close proximity to Texas Tech's campus like the Cotton Court Hotel and the newly renovated DoubleTree by Hilton, experience Raider Power throughout the "Hub City"!

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