

## TEXAS HIGHWAYS--CARTHAGE--MALLORY

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

# CARTHAGE

WHERE COUNTRY MEETS WESTERN

**W**ell, it ain't safe to go up there, Tex," the sidekick chortles in a 1930's film playing on a TV at the Tex Ritter Museum in Carthage.

The classic black-and-white image of a dashing Tex Ritter grins back, "About as safe as sittin' on a keg of dynamite!"

While "America's most beloved singing cowboy" corrals villains downtown, just outside Carthage, the wind rustles through a lone oak above the memorial statue of another entertainment legend, "Gentleman Jim" Reeves.

Through museum and memorial, Carthage thanks its lucky stars that fate picked this oil town of 6,500 as the birthplace of both country music great Reeves and western movie hero Ritter.

Indeed, country meets western in Carthage across the board.

Half a dozen shops parlay handicrafts and antiques like glassware, primitives, and vintage furnishings--country styles, then and now. At the same time, a local bed and breakfast housed in a refurbished horse stable rounds up a decidedly western style.

Country cooking like blackeye peas, pan-fried ham, and bread pudding spreads across the buffet line at Joe's Family Restaurant. Over at the Backwoods Trading Post, icons of the Old West (realistic cowboy and Indian mannequins) watch over one-

of-a-kind collectibles which end up as props in westerns like "Lonesome Dove." (See accompanying story, page \_\_\_.)

Every Saturday night in Carthage, country singers and pickers belt out old-fashioned tunes for the public. And every August, western cowpokes take center stage during the annual Panola County Cattlemen's Association Rodeo--complete with square dancing, cow chip tossing, and mock shoot-outs on the square.

In 1992 Carthage took aim at tourism big-time when the Tex Ritter Museum opened in the historic 1914 Hawthorn-Clabaugh House.

First off, museum visitors get a short video welcome from TV and film star John Ritter (Tex's son). Then they trace the trail of the singing cowboy. Room by room, family relic by relic, Tex (Maurice Woodard) Ritter's rise to fame unfolds like a classic Texas tale.

Born in 1905 to a local musical farm family, Tex later moved with his parents to Nederland on the Texas coast where he starred as a high school debater. In pursuit of a law degree from The University of Texas at Austin, his trail took a turn when he joined the school glee club under the tutelage of cowboy composer Oscar J. Fox. That influence, plus close friendships with noted musicologist John A. Lomax and author J. Frank Dobie, saddled Tex with a mounting passion for cowboy ballads and traditions of the Old West.

After a summer tour singing and lecturing on "The Texas Cowboy and his Songs," Tex headed for New York City where he landed a role in a production of "Green Grow the Lilacs" (later renamed "Oklahoma"). By 1932 his fame galloped on the heels of the first major East Coast western-style radio show, "The Lone Star Rangers."

Drawn cross-continent to Hollywood, Tex starred throughout the Thirties and Forties in 78 westerns as the law-abiding, hard-riding hero who became a national role

model...and one of Tinsel Town's top ten money-makers. His ensuing recording career wrangled him induction into Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame.

In the Hollywood Room at the Tex Ritter Museum, a classic western plays on a TV (the museum owns 14 of his originals) surrounded by glittery outfits worn by Tex and wife Dorothy Fay, who appeared with him in several films. From the Nashville Room strains of Tex's hits like "Hillbilly Heaven," "Rye Whiskey," and "High Noon" (an Academy Award-winner) filter down a long hallway lined with awards and family mementos.

The Trail's End Room--a mock-up of the Fifties-era tack room where Tex entertained music and hunting buddies--sports part of Tex's considerable cowboy folklore collection, as well as childhood toys of sons John and Tom.

Some 60 original movie posters and lobby cards tacked around the museum promote films like "Westbound Stage," "Ridin' the Cherokee Trail," and "Rainbow Over the Range." Six-shooters drawn for action, Tex poses in photos with various sidekicks, often flanked by his stallion White Flash.

Museum director Tommie Ritter Smith (a relative of Tex's) hopes the exhibits strike a cord with visitors by tracing "the story of a famous man who was a really good human being."

Known for his generosity, Tex helped several fellow Texans break into show business--including country stars Hank Thompson and Buck Owens, as well as blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (better known as Leadbelly).

One Texas singer who Ritter proudly nurtured--fellow Panola County native, James Travis Reeves--soared quickly to the top.

After an injury in 1946 cut short a promising pro baseball career, Reeves turned to his other love, country music. Stints as a disc jockey at a Henderson radio station and at powerhouse KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, garnered Reeves recognition

regionally. Stage appearances on the Louisiana Hayride and the Grand Ole Opry put his mellow tones and well-mannered personality into the national limelight.

For "Gentleman Jim" Reeves, fame ended tragically in a 1964 fatal plane crash. In his brief meteoric career he scored international hits like "Mexican Joe," "Where Does a Broken Heart Go?" and "Welcome to My World." He appeared regularly on American television and also starred in "Kimberly Jim," a film shot in South Africa, where he sold even more albums than in his homeland.

Today, Gentleman Jim's burial place three miles east of Carthage remains a mecca for fans worldwide. The terrazzo image of a gigantic guitar lays embedded in a walkway that winds through the grassy memorial park. At the feet of a 12-foot-tall white marble statue of Reeves propped on his guitar, visitors stand in silence. They read the singer's lifelong wish, inscribed in stone, that his music might "dry one tear or soothe one humble human heart in pain..."

"This has always been a singing area," says longtime local educator and historian Leila Belle LaGrone. "The pioneers came from the Deep South singing their familiar religious and work songs. Later when modern country music came along, Jim Reeves and Tex Ritter brought fame to this area."

To encourage historical research, Mrs. LaGrone established the Leila Belle LaGrone Library. Its genealogical records, Civil War medical journals, family bibles, and early mercantile ledgers pack the downstairs of Carthage's oldest building, the restored 1891 Panola County Jail. Up a narrow flight of stairs, six original jail cells display law enforcement and wartime memorabilia--as well as county history exhibits, local art, and an antique whiskey still.

A restored turn-of-the-century bank building, known as Heritage Hall, houses a second county museum. Displays trace Panola County history and highlight the careers of Ritter and Reeves--along with fellow natives, noted American historian

Walter Prescott Webb, Margie Neal (first woman to serve in the Texas Senate), and Milton M. Holland (first black Texan to earn the U.S. Medal of Honor).

Heritage Hall also features the Texas Tea Room, where patrons dine on down-home daily specials like stuffed bell peppers, plus salads and sandwiches named after oil and gas geologic formations.

A recent nationwide guide to small town living named Carthage tops in Texas. With outdoor recreational resources like Lake Murvaul and Toledo Bend Reservoir nearby, the town's laid-back lifestyle boosted ratings. So did support for music...from its high school marching band (one of the state's largest) to its country and western heritage.

Visitors sample that C&W heritage every Saturday night at the Panola County Hayride. Area musicians perform popular and original country and western music in a family-oriented atmosphere where anybody who's a mind to, can step up and sing along.

Several homegrown top-name performers got their start at the Hayride--including Paul Brevard, a regular on stages in Branson, Missouri, and current Nashville star Linda Davis.

Carthage continues to thank its lucky stars for a musical legacy that keeps on growing...where country meets western.