

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--PRAIRIES & LAKES--MALLORY

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Epiphany on the Prairie

A Whirlwind Tour of Dinosaurs, Downtowns,
and Heavenly Delights

As a kid, driving to Dallas from my Tyler home brought an epiphany about halfway there. One minute, tall pines and oaks flew by outside the car window. The next thing I knew, the view opened to a carpet of black earth, fresh-plowed for cotton or corn, spreading to the horizon.

Traveling across these rolling blacklands still stirs me with a feeling of openness. Maybe that's how early 19th century pioneers felt as they emerged from forests to grassland prairies stretching from Texas to Canada. That chest-high sea of green must've seemed awesome, but the underlying soil proved demanding. (2)

The black color came from eons of carbon accumulating as grasses and other organic materials decayed. Its heavy clay content shrank when dry and swelled when wet, soil so fickle that farmers called it "dinner bell"--dirt too wet to plow before dinner and too dry after dinner. (1, 2, *Eidson*)

Yet blackland fertility paid off in spades. Cotton became king. Railroads arrived. And the land fulfilled its promise of wealth as thriving towns sprouted on the prairie.

During the 1930s, fickle weather (back-to-back drought and flooding) prompted decades of dam building which added major lakes to the prairies. (3)

Today, the 57-county "Prairies and Lakes" region comprises the middle of Texas, spanning 46,000 square miles (roughly the size of Pennsylvania). (5, 8) Home to 970

towns--small cozy communities and booming big cities--the region remains largely rural. (7) Considering its rich natural and cultural heritage (and a population of 6.7 million), (4) there's no wonder Prairies and Lakes proffers a bumper crop of interesting and exciting things to see and do...plus a whopping 21,440 miles of highway to explore. (9)

Washington County

Indeed, my whirlwind tour of the region begins in one of my favorite exploring grounds, Washington County, with drives so scenic it's fun getting lost.

Right off, history buffs like me head for Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historical Park and reconstructed Independence Hall, the "Birthplace of Texas." Standing in the frame building, I sense the winds of change that delegates spawned there on March 2, 1836 by declaring Texas free from Mexico.

History comes alive--literally--at the park's new Barrington Living History Farm. Built around the 1844 home of Anson Jones, last president of the Texas Republic, the working farmstead recreates life of the 1850s. Interpretive staff dress in period clothing and carry out typical farm chores--such as cooking, gardening, and livestock grooming--as they answer visitors' questions.

Also located in the park is the Star of the Republic Museum, which just renovated its first floor, adding new exhibits which chronicle Lone Star history from Native Americans to early statehood.

George Bush Library and Museum

A short hop to College Station brings history up to date. Dedicated in 1997, the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum houses millions of documents, photographs, and artifacts. Elaborate exhibits depict President Bush's life with pivotal events--such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War--getting special treatment. Among displayed gifts from the American people, I like the cowboy boots commemorating Bush's daring 1999 parachute jump and the pink dog costume worn by First Pooch, Millie.

Round Top and Painted Churches

South of Washington County, I revisit Round Top, a laid-back hotbed of history and culture. Nineteenth century buildings grace two pioneer villages--Henkel Square and Winedale. But many Round Top devotees come for classical performances--music at the International Festival-Institute and theater at Winedale's Shakespeare Festival. To accommodate overnighters, Round Top is rife with bed and breakfasts, many in historic homes.

Marveling at this busy little place, I stroll into the 38-seat Royers Round Top Cafe...only to find another marvel. Racks of scrumptious pies--buttermilk, chocolate chip, and pecan--ready to eat or ship wherever. Houston exiles Bud and Karen Royer turn flaky crusts into a cottage industry, complete with website sales. The Royers also serve up a sophisticated dinner menu that's more big city than tiny town.

Heavenly sweets under my belt, heavenly sights are on my mind...at Fayette County's gallery of painted churches. Churches at Dubina, Ammannsville, High Hill, and Praha lie a short drive apart, amid a pastoral world of farms accented by working windmills. The serene surrounds make stepping into the ornate churches even more inspiring. Intricate murals painted on ceilings, walls, and altars interplay with vaulted arches, faux-marble pillars, and stained glass windows. The thoroughly Gothic sanctuaries reflect an eastern European heritage.

Salado-Waco

A shrine of a different sort lies in the heart of the region at Waco--the Texas Rangers Hall of Fame and Museum.

On the way, I detour to the shopping and weekend getaway of Salado for a culinary fix. I'm addicted to the food and old-fashioned service of the venerable Stagecoach Inn, where waitresses still recite from memory the day's menu. It sounds like mom's Sunday best: fried chicken or baked ham, hushpuppies, tomato aspic or banana fritters, fresh carrots, salad, and homemade peach cobbler. A stage stop on the

Chisholm Trail in the 1860s, the inn once hosted notable generals Sam Houston, George Armstrong Custer, and Robert E. Lee, plus notorious train robber Sam Bass.

The man who hunted Bass down, John B. Jones, looms large, as do other Texas Rangers, at their namesake museum in Waco. Artifacts and photographs chronicle their exploits, beginning with the citizen-soldier ranging companies of the Texas Republic. A veritable arsenal of historic weaponry (from Bowie knives to Bonnie and Clyde's sawed-off shotgun) lines the walls, mixed with tidbits of tough-guy trivia. I discovered, for example, that the Rangers' trademark badges originally were carved from silver Mexican coins, a tradition continued today.

Granbury and Glen Rose

Texas abounds in old-timey squares centered around historic courthouses.

The best of the lot, as voted by *Texas Highways* readers, is Granbury. Walking its square is like perusing a library shelf packed with interesting titles. Here's the 1886 Granbury Opera House (year-round theater) and Granbury Live (pop and country music). There's the 1893 Nutt House, whose early-1970s restoration got Granbury's award-winning preservation bandwagon rolling. (It now houses a hotel and fine restaurant, with horse-drawn carriage rides waiting out front.) All around the square, visitors browse in more than 40 gift and antique shops.

From Granbury, the 17 miles to Glen Rose takes me back 100 million years to Dinosaur Valley State Park. Exhibits at the entrance show how 200 or so dinosaur tracks became preserved in the Paluxy River's rocky bottom. When ranger Tommy Herr shows me four tracks found last year, I realize an irony: Floods and drought benefit park visitors, because erosion uncovers new tracks, and dry conditions reveal tracks otherwise submerged.

Texas weather also "hums" with the 1,100 exotic, threatened, and endangered animals thriving down the road at Fossil Rim Wildlife Center. A scenic 9.5 mile drive through the park's 1,500 acres brings me up-close and personal with addax (African

antelopes), Grant's zebras, and reticulated giraffe. Next visit, I'll try Fossil Rim's safari-like guided tour or a behind-the-scenes look at its accredited breeding programs.

Fort Worth

For now, I'm off to the Fort Worth Zoo, home of the state's first koala exhibit. They're terminally-cute, alright, but slow as paint drying. I prefer the lively antics of nearby kangaroos and wallabies or long-time zoo favorites, the primates. A silver-back gorilla grooms himself beside a waterfall, as chimpanzees and colobus monkeys romp through trees. With natural habitats, shade trees, and flowing water, the zoo has been nationally ranked by the *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today*.

Fort Worth's nearby Cultural District gets rave reviews for highbrow venues--including the Kimbell Art Museum, the Amon Carter Museum (closed until next fall for major expansion), and the Modern Art Museum. The Museum of Science & History and the Fort Worth Botanic Garden add natural touches to the district. And the Will Rogers Memorial Center (equestrian and livestock shows) brings a western flair.

If Fort Worth is "Where the West Begins," step one starts at the Stockyards National Historic District, once a livestock packing and shipping hub. Raised boardwalks take me past eateries, drinkeries, hostelries, and shops with a western twang. A cowboy leads his saddled longhorn "Shiloh" down Exchange Avenue, posing for pictures with tourists--except when the street clears for a cattle drive twice daily. The Stockyards Station features more shops and restaurants and doubles as a depot for the Tarantula train which makes four-time-weekly excursions between here, downtown Fort Worth, and Grapevine. On weekends, rodeo action fills the 1908 Cowtown Coliseum, and Bill Bob's Texas, the "World's Largest Honky-Tonk," showcases country music stars.

Sounds and especially tastes head for the border a few blocks south at Joe T. Garcia's. This Tex-Mex restaurant has the confidence to serve only two choices at night--fajitas or enchiladas. They're that good. Joe T's pleasant outdoor patio--with

Hispanic music, flowing fountains, and tropical plants--reminds me of garden restaurants in Mexico's colonial interior.

Arlington

Midway between Fort Worth and Dallas lies Arlington and its three consummate family fun parks. On the observation deck of the orange oil derrick of Six Flags Over Texas, I find a bird's-eye view of the amusement mania below. Lines at two of the state's premiere rollercoasters--the Texas Giant (wooden and old-fashioned) and Mr. Freeze (steel and state-of-the-art)--assure me that thrills are still the name of the game at this 221-acre theme park. Across Interstate 30, I see wet thrill seekers in queue at water park Six Flags Hurricane Harbor's Black Hole. The thought of speeding down the 500-foot-long water slide *in total darkness* sends chills up my spine...which I guess is the point.

I find a big-league baseball thrill nearby at The Ballpark in Arlington. The Texas Rangers play away today, so I take the guided tour of the dugout, clubhouse, press box, and owner's suite. As my group walks the inner concourse and onto the field, a sea of real green grass welcomes us. In right field the canopied Home Run Porch gives fans a cool, shady spot to snag homers. Architect David Schwarz gave the classic park a sense of place by using Marble Falls granite and bas relief sculptures of Texas scenes. The \$191 million, 49, 232-seat facility also sports the Legends of the Game Baseball Museum and Learning Center, where fans find memorabilia from greats like Babe Ruth and Willie Mays.

Dallas

When I was growing up, Dallas was the "Big City" of my imagination. Big D still impresses me, especially its central-city renaissance.

Downtown's most compelling attraction remains Dealey Plaza in the West End Historic District. Site of the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, it's still a mecca for tourists from around the world. They respectfully gather at The Sixth Floor

Museum--the former Texas School Book Depository, where Lee Harvey Oswald fired his shots--to look survey the tragic Elm Street scene below. Through detailed exhibits, the museum helps them ponder "who really did it." Across Elm, visitors stop at the newly-refurbished Kennedy Memorial to pay tribute.

Most of the West End, however, is just for fun. Renovated turn-of-the-century warehouses brim with boutiques, artisans, music clubs, and restaurants. "Serious fun" unfolds nearby in the Arts District, where the Dallas Museum of Art, the Dallas Theater Center's Arts District Theater, and the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center explore the old and new of the visual and performing arts.

Just east of downtown, a 277-acre National Historic Landmark, Fair Park, claims the nation's largest collection of 1930s Art Deco architecture, built for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition. It also hosts an amalgam of eight museums and six performance halls. This time of year, Fair Park overflows with rides, exhibits, livestock, and creative arts entries during the State Fair of Texas, the nation's largest state fair.

Lakes and Prairies

Wherever you go in the region, a boating and fishing lake seems just a line's cast away. Top recreational lakes include Lake Texoma, Ray Roberts Lake, and Lake Somerville, each featuring shoreline state parks, as well as Lake Fork, traditionally one of the nation's top trophy-bass fisheries. (13)

In Athens anglers think they've been hooked into heaven at the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center. Aquarium exhibits display popular inland species in natural settings such as a Hill Country stream and an East Texas pond. Even a novice like me oohs and ahhs during the dive show as a diver feeds the biggest largemouth bass in captivity, a 19 to 20-pound behemoth.

I find a subtler sense of "Wow!" at the state's largest blackland prairie remnant, the Nature Conservancy's Clymer Meadow near Greenville. As I sit on the hilltop porch of the Conservancy office with manager Jim Eidson, a cold rain blows through. "With

adequate rain, our grasses grow five feet tall or more,” says Jim, gazing over 500 rolling acres never touched by plow. Big and little bluestem, yellow indiagrass, eastern gamagrass, and switchgrass intermingle with 250 or so other plant species, many flowering. Jim says some of the preserves low-profile natives are hundreds of years old, and that the land looks much as it did when pioneer Jim Clymer set it aside as a hay meadow in the 1850’s.

That’s about the time Frederick Law Olmsted emerged from East Texas’ forests onto the blackland prairie on assignment as a newspaper correspondent. Later recognized as the founder of American landscape architecture and designer of New York City’s Central Park, Olmsted described the experience in his 1857 *A Journey Through Texas*: “We came out suddenly, as if a curtain had risen, upon a broad prairie, reaching, in swells like the ocean after a great storm, to the horizon before us.”

I ponder Olmsted’s observation as bison graze on a rise in Clymer Meadow. Childhood memories of my own prairie epiphanies come rushing back, and the kid in me can’t help but smile.