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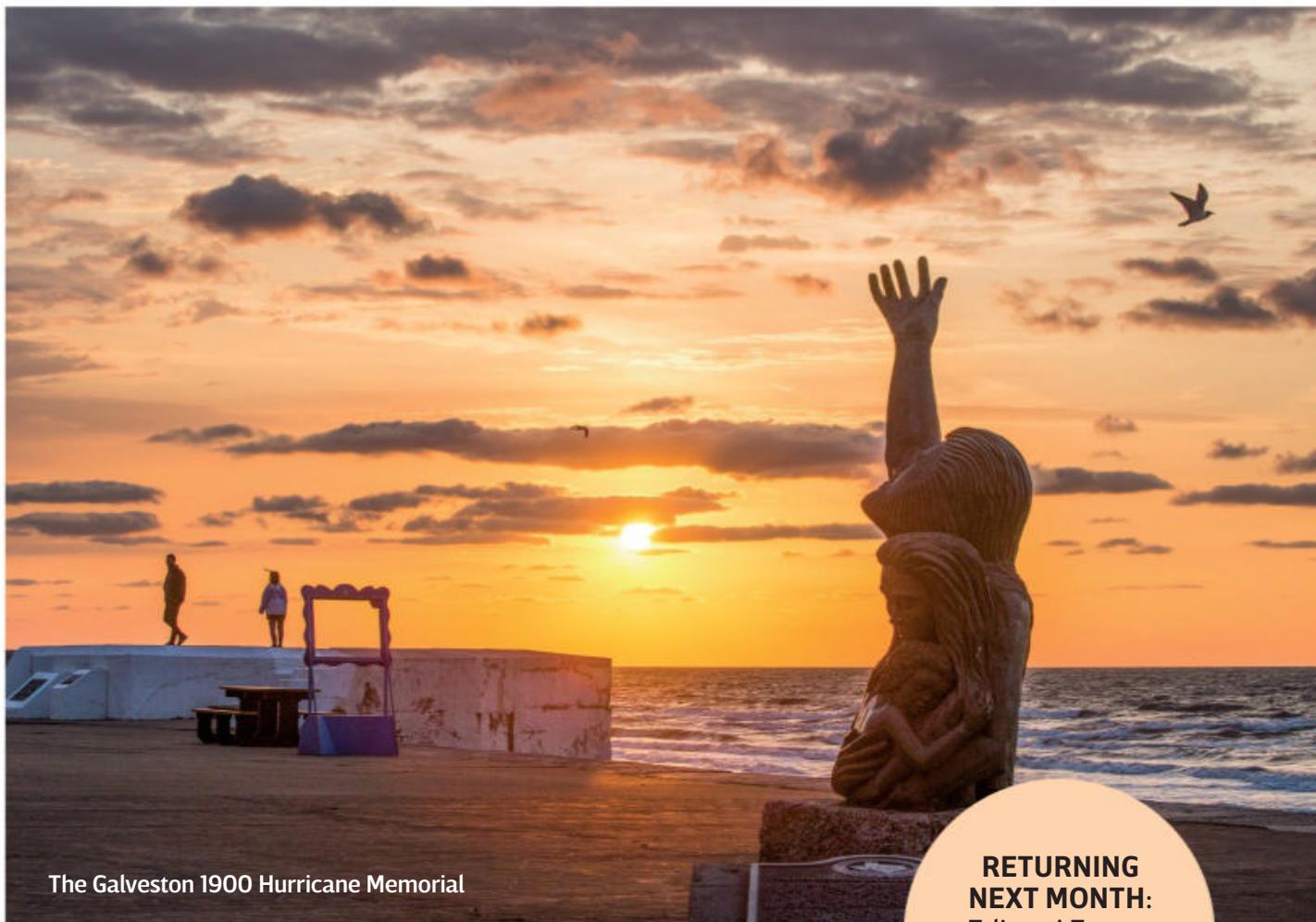


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EDITOR'S
NOTE



The Galveston 1900 Hurricane Memorial

**RETURNING
NEXT MONTH:**
Editors' Events
Picks and Regional
Listings

Treasure Island

While many beach towns across the country can become indistinguishable in our minds, there's no place quite like Galveston. That's due partly to the city's deep history—its first-known human visitors were the Karankawas, who hunted and fished on the island. It's also the presumed location of the 1528 shipwreck of the state's first historian, Ávar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Galvestonians' indefatigable spirit is equally compelling. Their resilience saw the port city through the devastation of the 1900 hurricane following its glory days in the late 1800s, and countless booms and busts over the ensuing century. In our cover story, contributing writer John Nova Lomax paints a definitive portrait of the town while illuminating its current renaissance.

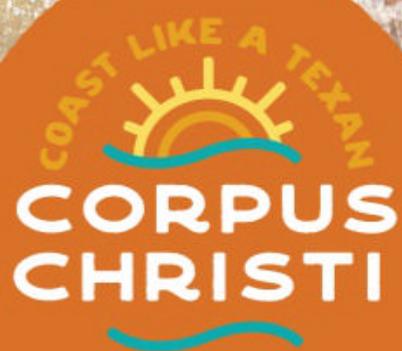
Lomax has an intimate knowledge of the coastal haven, which he calls an extension of home—he's fairly certain his first trip there was in utero. The seventh-generation Gulf Coast Texan recalls nostalgic highlights such as a week-long childhood beach house vacation with his aunts and visits to the now-defunct Sea-A-Rama—"a budget version of Sea World."

"There is nothing like going to sleep after a long day in the sun and surf, the waves and gulls still echoing in your ears and the sight of breakers burned into the back of your eyes," Lomax says. "When I would pick up a Galveston seashell during exiles in Nashville and hold it to my ear, the sound of the ocean inside would almost make me cry."

Despite the hazards that can accompany a visit to Galveston—Google "tar balls" and "stinky sargassum"—the city has always had Lomax's back. He relates another memory of a trip as a new parent with his toddler son in tow. Lomax buried his wallet in the sand before joining his family for a swim and promptly forgot about it until he was back in Houston. His expectations were low on his rescue mission, but he found it right where he had left it. "I found a stray \$20 bill to boot," he adds. "Not mine—just a little gift from the sea." That's Galveston. Despite myriad trials and tribulations, it always comes back, bearing new gifts.

EMILY ROBERTS STONE
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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VOLUME 68 . NUMBER 6

JUNE

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Land of the Free

If Texas is like a whole other country, Galveston is like another world. Since the 1800s, the island has gone from destruction and debauchery to booming tourist destination—all the while maintaining its independent spirit.

By John Nova Lomax

54

Remnants of the Rio Grande

Meandering through deep South Texas, ancient offshoots of the Rio Grande known as resacas provide an aquatic haven for wildlife and nature lovers.

By Lydia Saldaña

THE SUN RISES
over a resaca
south of Mission.

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JUNE

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ON THE COVER

*Photo by Al Argueta
Shot in Galveston's Historic
Strand District*



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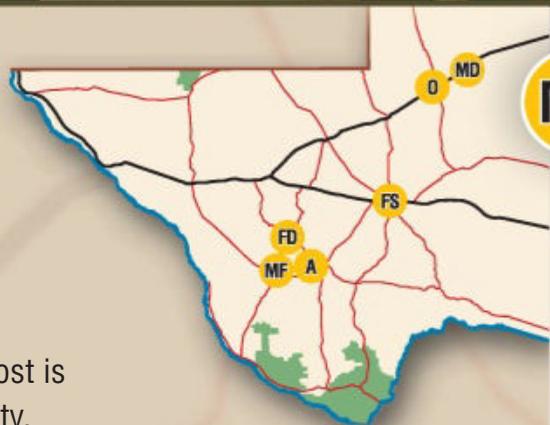
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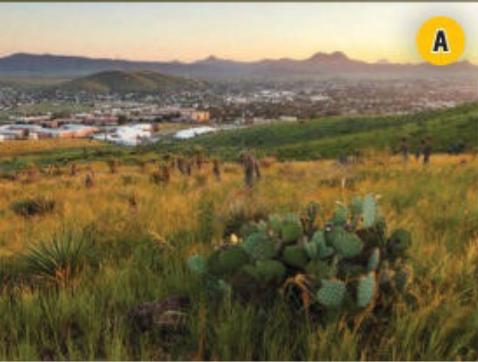
July 17 - Reunion Festival

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Jun 24, Jul 29 - Midweek Mercantile & Music: outdoor market

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Behind the Story



In 2013, after a stint as a TV news reporter in Dallas and 24 years as the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department communications director, Lydia Saldaña began her current role as the communications director for the TPW Foundation. These jobs have given her a holistic view of the environment, which helped her write “Remnants of the Rio Grande” (Page 54), about South Texas’ distinctive resacas. “Everything I do and write about, and any assignment I have that’s not necessarily about conservation, I’m hardwired to talk about it,” the Fort Worth-based writer says. “It’s more than just the water you see, it’s everything that’s connected to it—its wildlife, its birds.” She sees the resacas, some of which formed 10,000 years ago and have since been harnessed by humans for agriculture and flood control, as a collaborative effort between man and nature. “Now, these resacas are managed by man, whereas before, it was a totally natural function of the river,” Saldaña says. “They’ve been forever altered by man, but there will never be new resacas.”

Featured Contributors



Michael Arceneaux

For “I’ll Give You My Last” (Page 16), Arceneaux explored his relationship to his family and his hometown of Houston. “As difficult as it can be to live through—much less to write about—challenging times, I’d like to think we’re always better for opening up about them,” Arceneaux says. “And it’s always an honor to write in a way that calls for me to be explicitly Texan.” Arceneaux is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *I Can’t Date Jesus: Love, Sex, Family, Race, and Other Reasons I’ve Put My Faith in Beyoncé* and *I Don’t Want to Die Poor*. He is currently working on a third book and adaptations of his first two.



Al Argueta

The Austin-based photographer, who shot this month’s cover, once landed the cover of *National Geographic Traveler* as a happy accident. He stepped out from his beachside cabana in Belize after it had stopped raining and figured he’d make a dusk exterior photo just for fun, and the photo was picked up by the magazine a few months later. The cover shoot in Galveston required “a lot more planning and some luck to get sunny skies and just the right angle,” Argueta says. His travels these days are limited mostly to Texas, where he’s lived since 2004, and surrounding states to photograph hotels.

Photos: Larry Ditto (top); Steven Duarte (middle)

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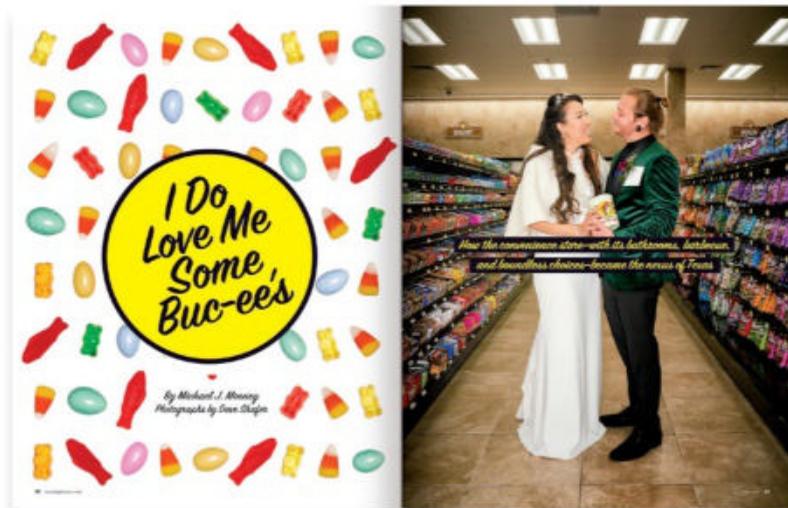
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MERGE



Loved the article about Buc-ee's in the May issue. Buc-ee's is a rite of passage when we travel Texas highways. No matter the time of day or the occasion for traveling, we have to get our Buc-ee's fix!

Jim Bates, Marshall

King Vidor

Met him a couple of times around 1981 ["From Galveston to Hollywood," April]. He was surprisingly sharp in his old age.

Jennifer Daniels-LaBonte, Brackettville

Mudbugs

My dad was half Cajun; I grew up eating crawfish ["Snug as a Bug in the Mud," April]. In about 2nd grade, my schoolmates laughed at me for eating "bugs." I told them they didn't know what's good.

@retired_in_tx

Outdoor Opportunities

Being in nature is so important ["Reclaiming the Outdoors," April]. I'm glad organizations like those in this article are connecting more young people to it and helping them feel safe.

@wldct1998

King of Conjunto

What a wonderful story on Flaco Jiménez ["El Rey de Tejas," May]. You make me feel proud to be a fifth-generation Mexican American. I would love to see more stories of musical artists such as Sam the Sham from Dallas or Sunny Ozuna from San Antonio. Tejanos have a rich history in music, battles, civil rights, politics, and so much more that is never mentioned. I tip my hat to you and your wonderful, fantastic staff and publication.

Anthony Barron, Terrell

Cactus Caper

Please, please stop depicting saguaro cactus as a cactus found in Texas ["The Ties That Bind," May]. There are two of them drawn on the map of Texas. It does not grow in this state; you will find them in Arizona. I have seen these wonderful Arizona cacti throughout the years as a "symbol" of what is Texan. The barrel

cactus is found in West Texas, and it is beautiful—include it instead, or the prickly pear. The succulents we have are amazing too.

Carol Ann Napier, El Paso

TH: Thanks for needling us—we'll stick to Texas natives in the future.

Gone to East Texas

I enjoyed your "Gone to Texas" edition [May], but where was East Texas? There is a lot to see and do in the Piney Woods.

Ronnie Morrison, Henderson

Cadillacs to Camrys

Paul Kix's paean to Dallas and his '88 Cadillac ["Taken for a Ride," May] reminded me strongly of growing up in Richardson and north Dallas in the '70s. I was lucky enough to get my parents' enormous '68 Oldsmobile 98 at about the same time as my driver's license. The huge four-door had seen better days, but to me her best years were yet to come.

She got me through high school and to Baylor as my refuge, concert hall, and coffee shop. Like Paul and Sonya, I ended up in New England without the '68 Olds or her successor, an equally imposing '70 Riviera. Nowadays I like my Camry just fine, but my love for those great old cruisers never fades. Connecticut is beautiful, too, but I still miss Texas every day.

James Rains, New Milford, Connecticut

That Looks Familiar...

Thanks to *Texas Highways* and Theresa DiMenno for the wonderful article "The Tones of Texas" [April]. I am a fourth-generation photographer from Houston and a subscriber for many years. As soon as the issue came out, I started getting calls about the picture on Page 49. It is my backyard on the Guadalupe River at our Hill Country home near Hunt. Theresa captured it beautifully and the other pictures in the article as well.

Mike Marvins, Ingram



Night Lights

“I’ve tried to take this photo at different times over the years,” says Kathy Adams Clark of her picture of the Galveston Fishing Pier. “Sea fog, high winds, and other conditions can prevent it.” But on this night in April 2016, the setting was just right. Clark, who’s based in The Woodlands, says she used a small lens aperture of f/22, which sharpened the lights and created the starburst effect. Along with fishing, the pier at 9001 Seawall Boulevard is home to Jimmy’s on the Pier restaurant, an espresso and ice cream bar, a bait and tackle shop, and bike and surfboard rentals.





Nederland

Carol Culp recounts a slice of Dutch American history in the Golden Triangle

By Heather Brand



CAROL CULP, wearing a traditional Dutch bonnet, is the curator of the Dutch Windmill Museum. Set in a replica historical windmill, the museum interprets Nederland's history and honors the town's early settlers.

The swath of land between Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange became known as “the Golden Triangle” after the 1901 discovery of oil at Spindletop created an influx of wealth. These days, visitors might assume the nickname comes from the port and refinery lights that glitter at night along Sabine Lake and the Neches River. But amid the industrial activity, there are glimmers of the area’s agricultural past. In the town of Nederland, wedged between Beaumont and Port Arthur, the Dutch Windmill Museum, constructed in 1969 to look like one of Holland’s traditional windmills, pays tribute to the Dutch settlers who established rice and dairy farms here in the late 19th century. Their history is often retold by Carol Culp, the curator of the museum for the last six years. A native of neighboring Port Arthur, Culp moved to Nederland in 1965 to raise her family.

Founding Father

“Arthur E. Stilwell was an entrepreneur who built many towns, including Port Arthur, which he named after himself, and Nederland. He had a land company, but he needed someone to promote it. He became friends with a Dutchman named Jan de Goeijen, who was instrumental in getting investors from Holland. Stilwell promoted the land by showing pictures of Florida with palm trees and flowers and said that it was a fertile place where anything would grow. He called the town Nederland, which means Netherlands, and built the Orange Hotel. Of course, Stilwell’s main goal was to sell land. Sorry to say, that hotel is now gone.”

The Dutch Connection

“About 100 Hollanders came over on three boats starting in 1898. The museum has a trunk from one of the boats. The trunk is marked with the person’s name, the name of the boat, and the word ‘Galveston’ because they came through Galveston. When the Hollanders got here, there was nothing but mud and mosquitoes. Some of them didn’t like it, so they went back. But the real pioneers stayed. They had to start from nothing. They started rice farming and dairy farming.”

Cajun Invasion

“In 1901 Spindletop happened in Beaumont, and all kinds of people came, including the Acadians. We call them Cajuns. They needed work and had heard about the jobs here. The Hollanders were the ones who had built the town, but they needed workers. The Hollanders were stoic and serious, and the Cajuns were loud and boisterous—totally opposite. But the two cultures merged and helped one another. La Maison des Acadiennes is next

door to the Dutch Windmill Museum. It’s a replica of an Acadian house, showing what life was like 120 years ago.”

Famous Names

“The two museums are located in Tex Ritter Park. Tex Ritter was a famous country and western actor and singer in the time of Roy Rogers. The Dutch Windmill Museum has some of his records and also a suit that he performed in. He was the most famous person to come out of Nederland in his era. Another was Buddy Davis. Buddy had gotten polio as a child, and they thought he would never walk again. But he grew to be 6 feet, 8 inches tall and won the gold medal for the high jump in the 1952 Olympics. We have the bar that he used in that high jump.”

Local Flavors

“There are several Cajun restaurants here, but my favorite restaurant is The Schooner. It’s been here since 1947. It has awesome seafood—the broiled red snapper is my favorite. They also have wonderful steaks and hamburgers.”

Downtown Destinations

“Boston Avenue is the original main street. It has a lot of little boutiques. Down the street, over the railroad track, is Setzer’s, which is a local landmark. It’s been here a long time [since 1912]. At one time, it was used for rice storage by one of the early Dutch families. Later, it was a feed store. Now it’s a hardware store, and they have knickknacks and gifts. It’s really a neat, old-timey place. You can go anywhere in Nederland in 5 minutes. It’s calm here; it’s a good place to raise a family.”



TOWN TRIVIA



POPULATION:

17,371



NUMBER OF STOPLIGHTS:

9



YEAR FOUNDED:

1897



NEAREST CITY:

Port Arthur, 9 miles southeast



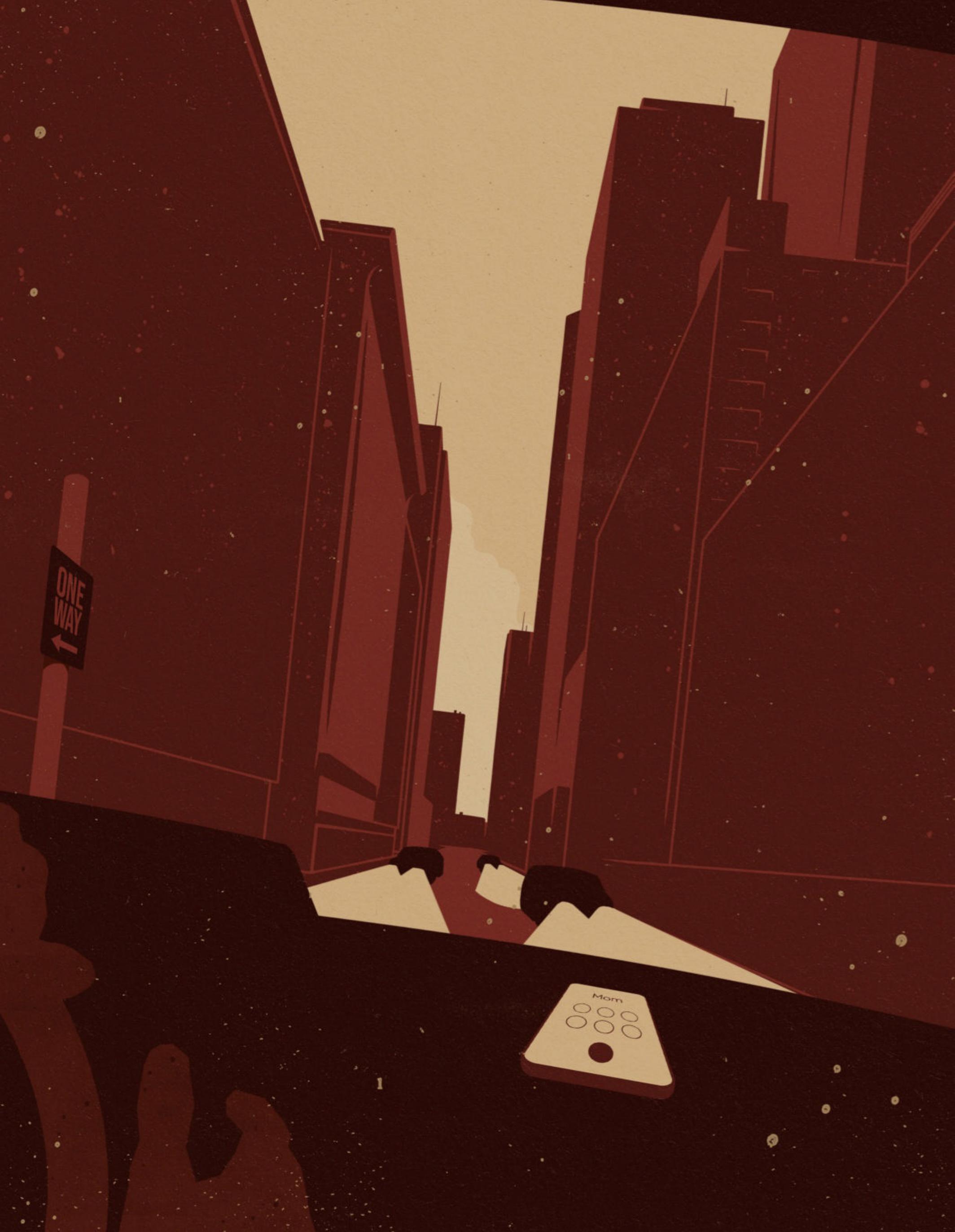
MARQUEE EVENT:

Nederland Heritage Festival, mid-March



MAP IT:

Dutch Windmill Museum, 1500 Boston Ave.



I'll Give You My Last

A Houston native returns home from
Harlem to heal alongside his family

By Michael Arceneaux



An earlier-than-anticipated death is not ideal, especially to go out in such an unfortunate way.

It's partially my fault for even needing directions from the airport in the city I grew up in, but in my defense, I had a right to be slightly confused. So much of Houston remains the same, but my eyes can't help but notice all of the changes. Like how the Airbnb I was staying at

was listed as located in the "EaDo" area. I had no idea what it meant, but apparently thanks to realtors and new arrivals to Texas, it's a cute nickname for East Downtown.

On arrival at my Airbnb, I realized I was basically in Third Ward, given Emancipation Avenue was right behind me. Some might be more specific and say I was staying in Old Chinatown. I did recognize the Kim Son restaurant my mom used to order General Tso's chicken from and that my best friend still swears by. Still, there was a lot of construction going on, and I couldn't keep up.

Evidently, neither could the I app I was using to help find my way. That right turn I was directed to make sent me down the wrong way on a one-way street just seconds before the lights on the other side turned green. The app in question shall remain nameless, but I will never shut up about the brief terror it put me through.

The cars were going so fast, I had no time to be startled. Lots of honking horns from drivers, and I'm fairly certain several people wearing face masks were cussing me smooth out. I suppose I can see their point of view from their side of the street, but I swear on my love of Megan Thee Stallion that it was the app—not me! I admit, I have struggled with parallel parking, but I know how one-way streets generally work.

At this point, I was already in Houston for a lot longer than I had anticipated.

Back before the pandemic began and my eventual retreat to Houston, my 2020 plan was as follows: finish the book tour for my second essay collection, *I Don't Want to Die Poor*, and leave New York City forever. I had been living in Harlem for seven years. The first years were good, but the rest were a mixed bag. As time wore on, I felt more distant from most members of my family back in Houston. The problem was magnified when I started coming home far less often because I just didn't have the money and was too proud to ask for it.

Freelance writing can be difficult to juggle on its own, but when you couple it with sizable student loan debt, every check matters. When I finally got in a better financial position, I wanted to reclaim missed time with my family by spending a couple of months in Houston

Simply leaving Houston never made my life any better either. It's why I liked D.C. until I didn't. The same for LA. And then New York. The only thing that stuck was my accent, which followed me everywhere. I have only ever identified as a Houstonian and Texan—like Beyoncé.

before making my way to Los Angeles to forge a career writing for TV.

But then life as we know it came to a stop. I adjusted like everyone else and did my book tour and everything else from my tiny New York apartment, a place I had long ago grown to hate. I will always appreciate the exposed brick, but hearing all of those sirens signaling death did

a number on me. I love Harlem, even though it was generally too loud of a neighborhood even before the plague. By mid-fall, when I knew it would only get darker, colder, and lonelier there, I decided I couldn't take it anymore.

Initially, it felt good to be home. But as much as I love Houston, I can easily be thrown off course to disastrous results.



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After successfully swerving away from several potential car crashes—avoiding death by wrong turn at the age of 36—I managed to get to US 59/Southwest Freeway without a scratch. This trip back to Houston was supposed to be relaxing, but it would be one drama after another.

I was in a rental car heading to my real home on the southside of Houston, in an area known as Hiram Clarke. I recall hearing it referred to as an “inner-city neighborhood” during an assembly at James Madison High School, or “Hiram Clarke High.” I would describe it as a collection of neighborhoods joined by Hiram Clarke Road. No matter which specific subdivision you’re in, you’re likely to see an old sedan converted into a “slab.” Also, Screwed Up Records & Tapes, a record store selling music by Houston hip-hop icon DJ Screw, is in Hiram Clarke—not far from a Jack in the Box that will outlive us all. I ate so many Extreme Sausage Sandwiches during my senior year of high school that I can never eat them again, but thankfully, a Breakfast Jack still hits and doesn’t expand my belly as much.

I’ve always been tickled by the way Hiram Clarke is pronounced on local news (Hi-rahm Clarke) as opposed to how those who live there say it (Harm/Herm Clarke, depending on your twang). I was heading there for my mama’s comfort and a side of brisket. But I was met with another needless reminder of how fragile life is in the process.

While at a stoplight, I gave her a call.

Hey, Mama. I just got sent down the wrong way on a one-way street. I’m OK. But I would have been so mad at myself for dying because I know that would be such an inconvenience to you given the week you’ve had.

Her voice, in its Louisiana-shaped glory, always calms me. She laughed a little bit for my sake, but she told me she detected anxiety in my voice. I took her advice to get off the phone, watch the road, and remember to breathe.

I worry my mom enough as it is. I have not used that app since.



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Less than a week before, my dad suffered an injury at work that likely would have proven fatal if not for a caring coworker who knew to take him to a clinic, and subsequently, have him rushed to the emergency room. The worst was avoided, but I hated that we all had to endure such a scare in an already dark year. One where individually and collectively, we had already suffered so many losses.

It made my recent choice to finally flee New York and spend time at home, around my family, feel like the right one. The irony is not lost on me that as much as I love my dad, he's also the reason why I hadn't been home as often as many would have liked over the previous decade. It would have really sucked for either of us to go out right as I was trying to right the wrong of such long-standing absence.

It's hard enough for anyone to have a successful career as a writer, much less someone like me—Black, working-class, from the South, who knows none of the kinds of people doing any of the things I have imagined doing.

I love and appreciate my parents, but it was a difficult home to be raised in. And one parent was more responsible for that than the other. My dad's angry outbursts, often enhanced by drinking, were typically directed at my mother, but he tormented all of us with his tirades. Human beings are complicated, and in

the case of my dad, I have a deep understanding of the phrase "hurt people hurt people." Still, the darker parts of my past and his anger that fueled them have overshadowed my childhood and followed me into my adulthood.

I have worked to understand why, but where I have failed is in learning to

A photograph of a man in a grey kayak on a lake, smiling and holding a green paddle. A black and tan dog is sitting in the kayak next to him. In the background, other people are kayaking on the water. The scene is set against a backdrop of green trees and a sandy shore.

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forgive and forget. I have been carrying the baggage of my childhood with me throughout my entire life, which prevented me from enjoying adulthood fully. I have long said that if I don't learn to let it all go, it's going to continue to haunt me. Yet I really never did much to correct the issue. Distance was just a way to provide relief. Some periods have lasted longer than others, but ultimately it all ends the same: I sort of lose it, break down, and find myself with many of the feelings I had as an 18-year-old seeking both a professional dream and to end some internal nightmares.

Since college, I have lived in Washington, D.C., LA, and New York. There were some brief stops back in Houston along the way, but each stint made me recall why I left in the first place, especially the night I had to be physically separated from my dad. It's hard enough for anyone to have a successful career as a writer, much less someone like me—Black, working-class, from the South, who knows none of the kinds of people doing any of the things I have imagined doing. I needed focus, and it had become abundantly evident that being too close to the root of my traumas prevented me from reaching my full potential. I love Houston so much, but it's often been hard for me to stay there longer than a couple of days as an adult.

At the same time, simply leaving never made my life any better either. It's why I liked D.C. until I didn't. The same for LA. And then New York. The only thing that stuck was my accent, which followed me everywhere. I have only ever identified as a Houstonian and Texan—like Beyoncé.

In New York, the struggles were mostly related to real estate. Someone once said Texans make the best New Yorkers, but that person must have been rich. I hadn't vacated my dungeon in Harlem because I simply couldn't afford to. Then a pandemic happened.

For the greater good, I felt like it was my responsibility to buckle down and stay put. New York is a great place for people who enjoy what it provides, but without access to the stuff that makes paying such high rent feel worth it

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(museums, proper restaurant dining, the theater, clubs and bars, comedy clubs, concert halls), all you have is your lonely self on an island.

I was left with my own thoughts, which weighed me down more the longer I lingered with them. I was fortunate to be working throughout the pandemic, but work can only distract you from yourself for so long. That, more than anything, is why I ended up leaving under a wave of sadness, anger, and loneliness to another place where the cycle is bound to repeat itself.

Near the end of last summer, my mom said something that caught me off guard: "I know it's hard for you to come home because as much as you love us, you dealt with a lot of pain here."

It broke my heart to hear her say it. I started to cry on the phone. It's not like I hadn't written or told friends as much, but I never wanted to admit that to my mom. I never wanted to hurt her feelings because I love her so much. Many of us can have complicated relationships with our folks, but most of us dare not ever say anything that feels like a slight, especially when we know how much they have sacrificed for us.

Although she said it for the both of us, she argued that even if it didn't feel like it, it was in my best interest to come back to Houston. This time, I didn't immediately disagree. She was right to say I needed to be closer. We both knew it was time I stopped running away from the problems that were going to keep following me no matter where I laid my head. LA could wait.

In the first few weeks back, I felt generally more at ease. Some of that was because of the "easier" aspects of life in Houston versus New York, like more space, more sun, more fried alligator. I no longer have to go to a laundromat because my Airbnb has a washer and dryer. Also, it's better to drive to Shipley Do-Nuts than to walk to Dunkin' Donuts.

Despite the perks, I was still overly emotional. I cried in conversation with

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In the first few weeks back, I felt generally more at ease. Some of that was because of the “easier” aspects of life in Houston versus New York, like more space, more sun, more fried alligator.

my mom when we talked about what’s kept me away, and I was angry when greeted by some of those very triggers directly. None of it was comfortable, but all of those emotional outbursts felt necessary. They were confirmation that I am not as over the past as I’ve professed. Plagues suck, but they do provide good

rationale for people to stop pretending—should they have the will.

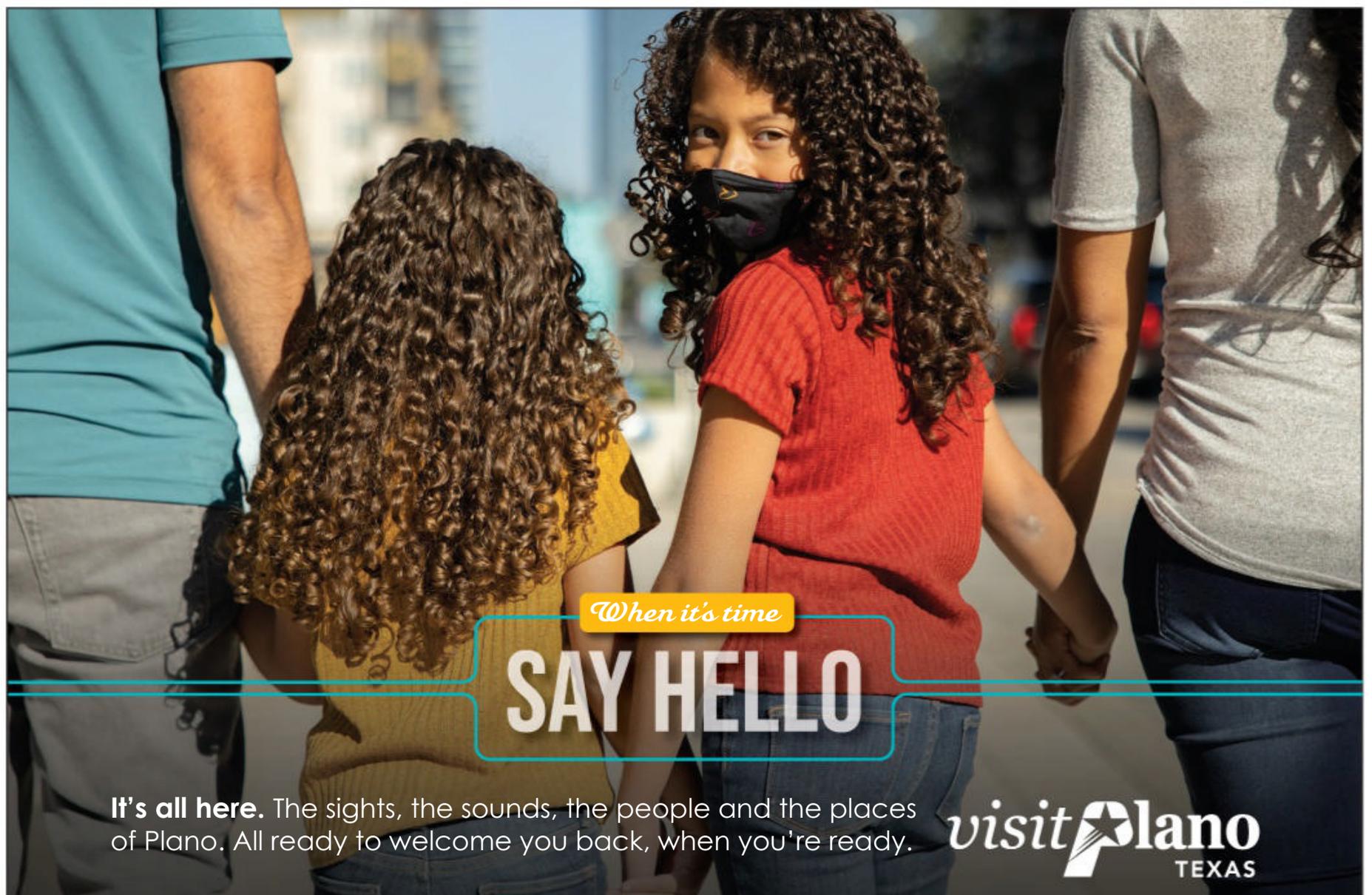
My dad is my dad. He always says to me, “I’ll give you my last.”

That has always been true, but at this point in my life, that’s not what I want from him. I want to have a conversation in which I express what I feel were his

mistakes and he says, “Son, you’re right, and I apologize.” But that’s not going to happen. His brisket—the one I was driving home to get, along with a hug from my mom—is more tender than his conversation.

In my adult years, though, we’ve at least been able to say “I love you” to each other. Now, we even hug. I have to take what I can get, appreciate it all for what it is, love him deeply all the same, and meanwhile, look elsewhere for the resolution that will give me the total peace that’s long evaded me. I need to take charge of my own healing.

I’ve driven by it more times than I can count, but I hadn’t actually been to Hermann Park in more than a decade. It’s still hell to find parking, but the park is



even prettier than I remember. At 445 acres, it's about half the size of Central Park, but contrary to Texas standards, bigger isn't always better. I'm just glad Houston was able to seize control of its stereotype as a concrete jungle and the smog capital of the U.S. and invest in making this plot of land a natural beauty. It sure beats the choked roadways—and the app—that nearly hastened my death.

I had arrived with my sister for a walk along the trails. As we visited, I told her my problems will only follow me wherever I go. She reminded me that she'd told me that several years ago.

My sister has a way of centering me. She helped me realize I didn't need a serious scare about my dad or myself to remind me to value life. But if nothing else, I did get the kick in the butt I needed to understand that we are all only here

for an allotted amount of time. We are not in control of how long, but we can control how we spend the time we get. I have had a lot of good in my life in spite of so much pain. I need to stop picking at the scabs already.

I was happy to be outside in the fresh air after a year pent up inside. At one point, my sister and I walked around the Japanese Garden. It wasn't the best time of year to see it, but it was still beautiful to witness. I made a bad habit of not noticing much about the ground around me on foot in New York. But part of being back here was to be still and notice. I'm glad my sister was getting me to do that here and elsewhere.

I still want to head out to LA, but I have decided to stay in Houston until I'm ready, or vaccinated. My main concern isn't timing, but instead making

sure I don't leave with a chip on my shoulder or an underlying sadness. I don't want to be so easily triggered anymore by someone else's failure to change. I am closer to 40 than 30 now, and I don't think it's fair to me or those who love me to still be caught up in what happened so long ago.

I want to figure it out. I want to heal. And finally, after all this time, I recognize that none of that can happen if I don't start the process in the place where all the hurt started.

Before it became a destination in its own right, Hermann Park was mostly a no man's land—a cut-through to other destinations. I didn't want this trip to Houston to be the same. It's exactly the place where I need to be, and I didn't need an app to get here. Some places you just know by heart. 



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DRIVE

THE COASTAL
town of Boca Chica
is home to a SpaceX
launch facility.

A Rocket to Mars

Elon Musk's SpaceX site in Boca Chica attracts dedicated onlookers

By Michael Hardy





The first humans to land on Mars will likely blast off from a scrubby tidal flat on Boca Chica Bay in South Texas, a few miles north of the Rio Grande. Here, a short walk from the beach, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk has built a launch complex to one day send an intrepid band of pioneers hurtling into space on a mission to colonize the Red Planet. Although NASA has landed unmanned rovers on Mars, most recently Perseverance, a manned mission is still many years away. For now, Musk's team at SpaceX, the private spaceflight company he founded in 2002, is still testing the massive rockets that will carry his explorers on their interplanetary journey.

On a cool, windy day in early January, parked cars lined State Highway 4, the two-lane road running past the SpaceX facility. Beyond a chain-link fence, a few hundred yards from the street, the latest version of Musk's Starship prototype stood on its launch pad. The silver rocket, known as Serial Number 9 (SN9), rose roughly 12 stories. Tourists took photos while a film crew shot video atop a nearby sand dune. This area is evacuated during tests, but at other times you can drive right up to the launch pad, which isn't possible at NASA's Cape Canaveral.

The chance to witness a rocket close-up is drawing tourists from around the world to this remote stretch of the Texas coast. For test launches, which SpaceX has been conducting around once a month since late 2020, the hotels on nearby South Padre Island nearly fill to capacity. Hundreds of sightseers throng Isla Blanca Park, which offers some of the best views. Those unable to make the trip



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CONSERVATION BIOLOGISTS
David Newstead and Stephanie Bilodeau monitor migrating shorebirds near SpaceX.

watch launches live on YouTube channels like NASASpaceflight, which broadcasts from South Padre.

On the afternoon of Jan. 9—the second of SN9’s planned launch dates—Terri Verbecken placed a folding lounge chair on a picnic table at Isla Blanca Park and watched the spectacle. Verbecken is a retired sales director from Colorado who

winters in South Padre. She had a pair of binoculars and monitored the live YouTube feed on an iPad. Across a narrow inlet, 5 miles to the south, the rocket was clearly visible to the naked eye. Verbecken, an amateur astronomer, was also on hand for the launch of SN8 in December. “Oh my God, it was incredible,” she said. “To watch it lift off and then roll over

and come back down... It was like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Walter Corcuera and his son Jason drove overnight from Houston to catch the launch. They, too, had nabbed a picnic table, upon which they placed a camera tripod. “I’ve always wanted to see a launch in person rather than on TV,” Corcuera said. On the other side of the park, Lucero Martinez and her fiancé were fishing in the bay while waiting for blastoff. Their children and nephews played in the sand. “It’s amazing that this is happening here,” said Martinez, who teaches at a Brownsville public school and planned to show her students photos of the launch. “I love what Elon Musk is doing, his vision.”

Among space geeks, the Austin-based South African businessman and founder of the electric car company Tesla, is a nearly messianic figure. Cooper Hime, a 17-year-old from Missouri, graduated

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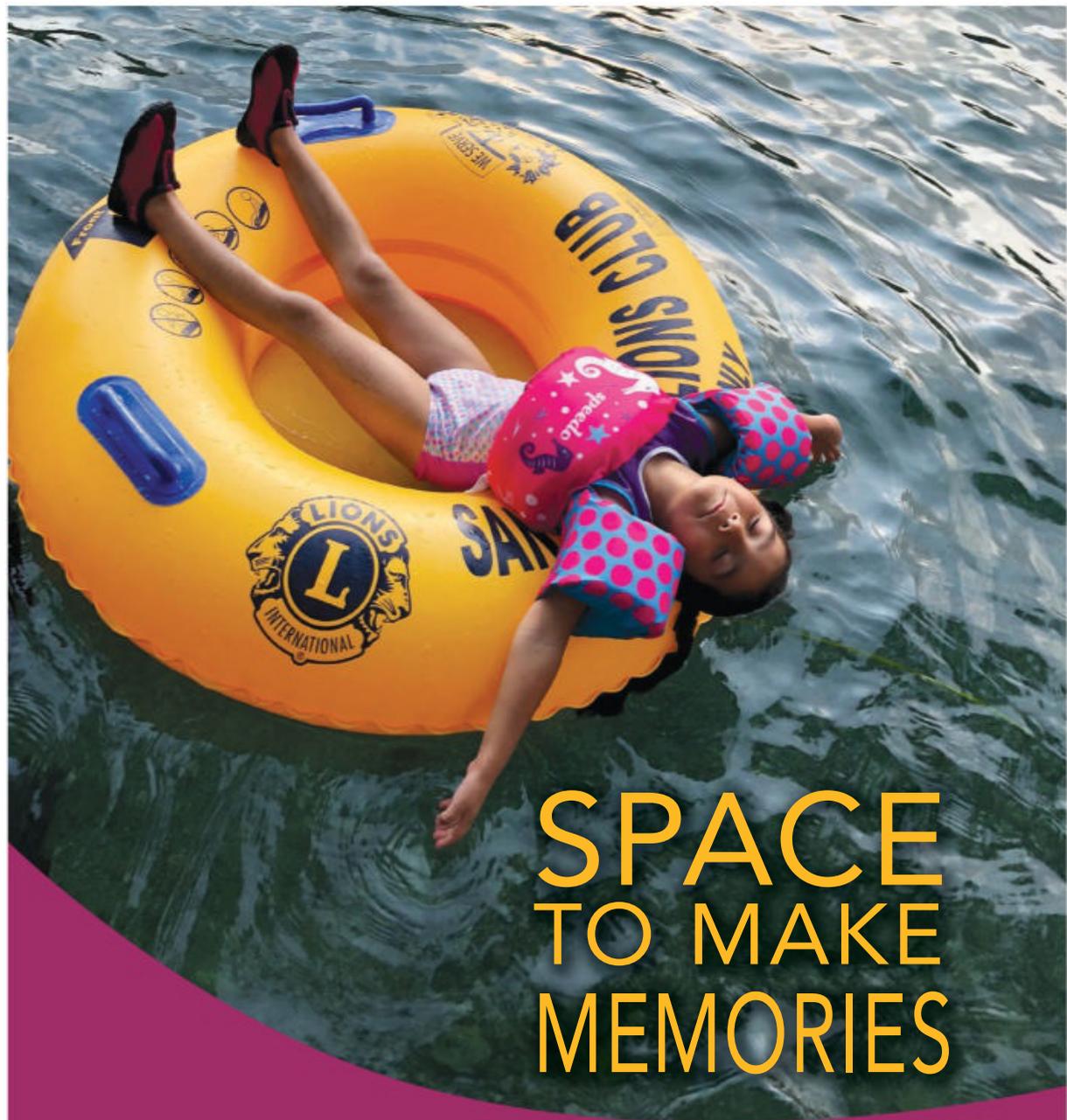
high school early so that he could move to South Padre with the hopes of eventually becoming an astronaut and being chosen by Musk as one of the first Mars colonists. “We need a backup copy of humanity in case something happens to Earth,” Hime said. “That’s the whole idea—to expand the scope and scale of consciousness for the species.”

Dayton Costlow, a 44-year-old Marine veteran who served two tours in Iraq, also dreams of traveling to Mars. “We’re going to start a new civilization,” he said. “If I can help play any part in that, I would be happy to go. It’s worth the risk and worth the sacrifice.”

Not everyone in South Texas has welcomed Musk’s arrival. In 2014, SpaceX quietly began buying up land around Boca Chica. It chose the location primarily for its proximity to the equator, where Earth’s higher rotational speed means rockets need less propellant to reach orbit. Another reason was its sparse population: Nearby Boca Chica Village consists of three streets lined with one-story houses inhabited by around 30 residents. Most accepted buyouts from SpaceX, which then converted their homes into accommodations for its local workforce. The houses are easily identifiable from their gray-and-white paint schemes and the identical Airstream trailers parked in their driveways. Musk recently announced plans to officially incorporate his company town as Starbase, Texas.

Boca Chica’s few remaining holdouts are also easy to spot. A “Come and Take It” flag hangs above the door of Rosemarie Workman’s ranch-style house. A former chief financial officer from Minnesota, Workman bought her home two decades ago and splits her time between Boca Chica and her home state since retiring in 2011. She and her husband love walking to the beach and birdwatching in Boca Chica State Park.

“There are only nine of us left,” Workman said. She has received five offers, none sufficient to buy a comparable home. “You find me a house that sits close to the ocean, with an unobstructed



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Resources for Rocketeers

Watch Party

Located on the southernmost tip of South Padre Island, Isla Blanca Park offers shaded picnic areas, ample parking, fishing jetties, and unobstructed views of SpaceX launches.

The south-facing rooms at the Pearl South Padre Resort feature balconies with excellent views of launches.

956-761-6551;
pearlsouthpadre.com

Rocket Ranch offers views 8 miles west of SpaceX. Guests can also take a pontoon boat on the Rio Grande to watch launches.
832-326-5741;
rocketranchbocachica.com

Frequent Fliers

To find out about tests, go to nasaspaceflight.com and the Twitter accounts @BocaChicaGal (run by a Boca Chica Village resident), @BocaRoad (announces Boca Chica road closures), and @op_boca (provides live updates on SpaceX tests).



DAVID SANTILENA operates Rocket Ranch near Boca Chica, an RV park for launch watches.

view of the water,” she said. “In South Padre that would cost \$800,000.”

SpaceX has inconvenienced life in town. During rocket tests, often announced at the last minute, Cameron County police officers close the only access road for up to 12 hours. “You can’t plan a family picnic or even a garage sale because you don’t know if people are going to be able to get here,” Workman complained. For rocket launches, which are more dangerous, SpaceX pays for residents to stay in South Padre hotel rooms. According to Workman, the engineers and scientists who now populate the town largely keep to themselves. That includes Musk, who stays in an unassuming bungalow across

the street from Workman when he visits. “He doesn’t talk to us,” she said.

The SpaceX development has also impacted the environment. The launch site is sandwiched between Brazos Island State Scenic Park, Boca Chica Beach, and the Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area. Sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach, while shorebirds nest in the tidal flats. Many species stopped nesting there in 2020, around the time SpaceX ramped up its tests, according to David Newstead, director of the Coastal Bird Program. “The noise, the smoke, and the vapor clouds extend way beyond their own property line,” Newstead said.

In March, a SpaceX rocket exploded in

midair during a test launch—the third this year—showering the neighboring refuges with debris. Musk appeared unconcerned, tweeting, “At least the crater is in the right place!” Environmental activists worry that a rocket might crash-land in the ocean, killing marine life and disturbing the delicate coastal ecosystem. The increased traffic along SH 4 has been another issue. “We’re noticing a lot of roadkill,” Newstead said. “Javelina, coyotes, bobcats, chachalacas, nighthawks, mockingbirds, Harris’s Hawks.”

Others have capitalized on SpaceX’s presence. In January 2020, David Santilena, an airline pilot from Houston, purchased 10 acres of land about 8 miles west of the SpaceX launchpad and opened Rocket Ranch, where tourists can park their RV or rent a three-room house. Guests have the option to watch the launch from the property or from a pontoon boat on the Rio Grande. Santilena said bookings have been steady, with people coming from as far away as New Zealand. SpaceX recently announced a major expansion of its Boca Chica facilities, suggesting its tourist appeal will only grow.

Unfortunately, not all rocket chasers get to see a launch. SpaceX is notoriously secretive, releasing little advance information. (The company did not respond to an interview request for this story.) One trick is to track the so-called Temporary Flight Restrictions issued by the Federal Aviation Administration to ensure airplanes don’t fly above the rocket. Social media is also key for monitoring highway closures and any warnings SpaceX issues to Boca Chica residents.

But tests can always be aborted. SN9 ended up sitting on its pad all weekend, disappointing tourists like Corcuera and Martinez who had driven to South Padre to see the big event. It later turned out that the rocket needed further maintenance before it could launch. As the sun began to set that afternoon, Verbecken folded up her lounge chair, stepped down from the picnic table, and prepared to head home.

She would be back. 🐾



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Equal Sign

A new mural in Galveston celebrates Juneteenth year-round

By Michael Hurd

The corner of 22nd and Strand streets in Galveston's Strand Historic District is sacred ground for Sam Collins III, a local historical preservationist. In 2012, Collins raised \$1,900 for the Juneteenth Historical Marker near the intersection commemorating June 19, 1865, the day Union Gen. Gordon Granger issued General Order No. 3 freeing enslaved people in Texas.

"There are times when I'm in Galveston I drive by that marker and sit in my car, eat lunch, meditate, and just kind of be with the ancestors," Collins says.

On one such visit, Collins had an epiphany about fusing public art and Black history in an attempt to bring clarity and greater exposure to the story of Juneteenth. He saw the east wall of the Old Galveston Square Building, located right behind the marker, as ideal for a mural. Collins partnered with Sheridan Lorenz, daughter of the late energy baron and developer George P. Mitchell; and the Nia Cultural Center, a local nonprofit dedicated to Afro-centric education and culture, to raise awareness and \$254,000 in funds. Set for a formal dedication on June 19, the 126-foot-long and 40-foot-tall work is titled *Absolute Equality*. The phrase comes from a line in Granger's order stressing that enslaved people's freedom "involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property."

Houston artist Reginald C. Adams, who also created a George Floyd mural in Houston, has led a six-person team for the mural's painting. The work features images of President Abraham Lincoln; Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad; and Estevanico, considered the first African to traverse Texas. But the work's central theme highlights the U.S. Colored Troops, whose overwhelming presence on that historic day has been overlooked.

"I'm honored to be a part of this project," Adams says. "It fits perfectly into the portfolio of my work, which has focused on celebrating, documenting, and recording historical accounts of my own culture—African Americans in America." 🐾

Gateway to the Gulf

The Intracoastal Waterway connects Texas to Florida and Texans to fun

By Dan Oko



Running more than 400 miles along the Texas coast and over 1,100 miles to its terminus in Florida, the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway is an aquatic superhighway most noncommercial boaters will never travel in its entirety—though local sections are well known to paddlers, birders, and anglers. Longer than the Erie Canal in New York, the GIW strings together ports from Brownsville up past Corpus Christi to Freeport, Houston, and the Sabine River, extending into Louisiana and through the Mississippi Delta. Completed in the late 1940s as a commercial trade route, the GIW in Texas exists as one of the state’s most audacious engineering efforts. It’s no wonder the passage fascinates history buffs, boaters, and beachgoers of assorted stripes.

Land-based travelers can best appreciate the shipping lane from high coastal bridges. Thirteen fixed spans and a few drawbridges are found along its length. These include the JFK Causeway, which travelers encounter on the way to Padre Island National Seashore; and Port Arthur’s Gulf-gate Bridge, the highest span along the Texas portion of the GIW.

The GIW has not only reshaped the coastline, but likewise commerce and industry. It has been a huge benefit to the oil and gas industry. Petroleum products make up more than 60% of the up to 90 million tons of freight transported along the GIW each year, according to the Army Corps of Engineers, which maintains the “ditch.” But tourists can enjoy myriad recreational activities at the maritime byway.

For the Birds

Despite the mixed environmental legacy of the GIW, the creation of spoil islands from dredging material has been a boon for otherwise displaced avian life. David Newstead, director of the bird program at the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, explains how birds have benefitted—and where to find them.

TH: Given factors like barge traffic, wave action, and erosion concerns, we were surprised to learn of the environmental positives of the GIW.

DN: When something is destroyed, something else is created. It’s true that the Intracoastal has definitely added to the number of spoil islands in Texas. Historically, it was [created] without that purpose, and fairly carelessly, but using material that was dredged up to create islands still remains one of the key habitat restoration opportunities we have.

TH: What types of birds might travelers expect to see along the GIW?

DN: A wide variety of wading birds or sea birds. The majority are what we refer to as “colonial water birds,” so that would be pelicans, herons and egrets, gulls, terns, skimmers, ibis to some extent. Sea birds that don’t need land for any part of their life history except for a roosting period and the nesting phase, which for most is February through August. They can pack onto these very small islands—a lot of them are less than an acre. A space the size of your backyard could host 600 or 800 birds.

TH: For Texans without a boat, is there a specific spot you can recommend?

DN: There’s one place just north of the JFK Causeway, which has a large colony of great blue herons. But it’s just a single species in the rookery, so it’s not a typical representation of the diversity that these support. With a boat, you could see them all.

1873

Year Congress approved funding to survey the length of the GIW

12 feet

Dredged depth of the entire channel as maintained by the Corps of Engineers

285,000

Approximate number of shipping vessels that travel GIW annually

Spotted Seatrout



Flounder



Black Drum



Sheepshead



Tarpon



Tight Lines

Gulf Coast anglers should give the GIW a shot.

Up and down the coast, there is abundant shoreline for casting into the canal, and those with access to a boat can explore many miles without worrying about running aground on oyster reefs or shallow bay flats. Common catches include the fish above. Bring a life jacket and beware of barge traffic and larger vessels that leave dangerous waves in their wake. Guided “Land Cut” expeditions to fish a remote GIW section between Kenedy Ranch and Padre Island National Seashore are also available.



Underwater Trailblazer

Clarence S.E. Holland didn't live to see the GIW's completion, but Texans can thank the Kentucky-born businessman for promoting it. In 1886, Holland traveled to Victoria and a few years later noted steamships plying the Guadalupe River. The sight inspired an idea: to create the Interstate Inland Waterway League to advocate for forming a continuous channel from the existing canal segments in Texas and Louisiana. It didn't hurt Holland's efforts that in 1901 Spindletop blew near Beaumont with the discovery of oil, providing “a major impetus” for the canal, according to the Texas State Historical Association. In 1919, he would become the president of the First Texas Joint Stock Land Bank and move to Houston. He died in 1945, four years before the Sabine River-to-Brownsville canal he'd campaigned for was completed in 1949.



GALVESTON HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Land of Free

Galveston's resilient spirit sparks another renaissance

BY JOHN NOVA LOMAX
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM MCCARTHY JR.

H

ouston Astros star Lance Berkman, of all people, put the enigma of Galveston to rest for me.

About 13 years ago, the slugger was a guest on a Houston sports talk show a few weeks after Hurricane Ike nearly

laid the island to waste. He was talking about a wedding there attended by his teammate, Galveston native Brandon Backe.

Unfortunately, the after-party at the poolside bar of The San Luis Resort, owned by island-born hospitality mogul Tilman Fertitta, got out of hand. Backe wound up fighting with Galveston police officers, badly injuring his shoulder.

What, the host asked Berkman, had Backe been thinking? Berkman sighed.

“The thing you have to know about Brandon,” Berkman replied, measuring his words, “is that he is not from America.”

“Brandon is from *Galveston*,” he continued. “And they have very different ways down on that island.”

The 50 miles of Interstate 45 separating Galveston from Houston might as well be 500 for how distinct the two cities appear. And though they are roughly the same age, Galveston feels 100 years older and a world apart. Some islanders refer to crossing the Galveston Causeway toward the mainland as “going to America.” Others say, “I’m from Galveston. It’s near Texas.”

You can sense the difference as you cross the gently arched bridge, eye level with sedate brown pelicans and laughing gulls, the slate-green bay shimmering on either side, the city before you. Robert “Bobby” Stanton, a veteran journalist and current community outreach coordinator at Houston Community College’s Southwest College, is what locals call a “BOI,” meaning “Born on the Island.” He puts it like this: “There’s just this tacit understanding that it is a completely different movie scene I’ll be entering, something totally different from what I just left.”

It wasn’t until I visited New Orleans that I experienced a similar feeling of leaving American norms behind. Mobile, Alabama, is a third sibling, and these three Gulf gems are all first cousins of Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, on the Atlantic. Each is a port, and by Old South standards, ethnically and religiously eclectic; ornate and elegant in architecture and preservation-oriented; each ignoring America’s prevailing westward gaze in favor of wistful looks at the genteel Old World across the seas. Each can be seen as an Athens to the more dynamic Romes inland: the Houstons, Dallases, Charlottes, and Atlantas of the world that dominate the regions these proud towns once owned.

But Galveston seems on the cusp of a new era in its alternately tragic and glorious history. According to the latest census statistics, the island’s population is growing at a rate not seen for decades. Real estate prices are rising fast, from the historic



OPENING SPREAD:
Bishop's Palace on
Broadway.
LEFT: Downtown
Galveston recalls its hey-
day as "the Wall Street of
the South."



FROM LEFT:
Lounging on the beach
is a Galvestonian
tradition; The 110-year-
old Hotel Galvez
straddles two of
Galveston's eras.



Coast lovers cruise
lively Seawall
Boulevard every
which way.



East End to the beaches of the West End. The dining and culture scenes are deepening, with artist lofts and art walks downtown. There are three microbreweries and, in a city once infamous for too many seafood restaurants whose fare may have been imported from unknown waters, more eateries like Katie's Seafood House that pledge to serve only what they catch locally. Meanwhile, a slow but steady march of hipster coffeehouses, galleries, boutiques, salons, and bars creeps westward along Market Street from The Strand Historic District.

Down on the seawall, mankind's war against the ocean never ends. In 2008, Hurricane Ike claimed the Balinese Room, the city's iconic casino-on-a-pier. Now a replacement appendage has sprouted: Pleasure Pier. This is likely the most popular and lucrative attraction on the waterfront since the heyday of the original Pleasure Pier, which stood on the same site and was brought to a sudden end in 1961 by Hurricane Carla.

It's a battle humans can't win in the long run, but at least Galveston is fighting it again. "The city has gone from one that looked forward to one that sees its happiest times in the past," Erik Larson wrote in his 1999 book *Isaac's Storm*, about the 1900 hurricane that started it all.

Not so much anymore. Not according to Michael Cordray, a BOI who, along with his wife, Ashley Cordray, hosts *Restoring Galveston*, the DIY

Network's coastal equivalent to Chip and Joanna Gaines' *Fixer Upper*. Of their competition, Ashley is envious but knows she has more to work with: "If the show can get just an ounce of the popularity that *Fixer Upper* has gotten, it would be great," Ashley told *Houstonia* magazine in 2019. "Galveston is already cool. Waco had nothing."

Michael backs up his belief in rejuvenating Galveston with local bona fides. A direct descendant of a male ancestor who arrived in Galveston in the 1850s—as a carpenter, no less—Michael is steeped in the lore of storms and the history of the island.

"Galveston right now is in a better place than it was 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 50 years ago," Michael told me while filming Season 3. "Galveston hasn't had as many good things going for it as it does right now in any year since 1899."

The Great Storm

While Galveston is the sum of all its eras, it remains defined by the Great Storm of 1900—a coldhearted demon of



Shearn Moody Plaza was originally the site of a train station; Galveston native Bobby Stanton says his hometown is an ideal bicycle city.



immense power whose winds and storm surge claimed somewhere between 6,000 and 12,000 lives and left a quarter of the city's 40,000 people homeless. It was not just the deadliest natural disaster in United States history—it was the deadliest day, period.

The island still wears memories of the storm like widow's weeds. Plaques bearing "1900" adorn buildings that survived the storm, and the name of the Cordrays' restoration company is Save 1900. High-water marks painted on the walls of some Strand establishments serve as macabre analogs to families who chart their children's growth with pencil marks.

It *can* happen here because it *has* happened here. Thousands of long-ago tragedies meld in the form of a citywide sense of melancholy and almost unbearable nostalgia, even for those who were born decades after the Great Storm.

There's also a strange form of survivor's guilt. Consider Glynda Oglesby, the BOI owner of The Wizzard, a Dorothy-and-Toto-themed dive bar on Church Street. It's a bright Sunday afternoon before St. Patrick's Day, as the last revelers stagger home from Barcycle, the city's yearly beer-and-bike fest. Oglesby is explaining how much of her family died in the hurricane, leaving her grandfather bereft. But like his hometown, he started over.

"If not for that 1900 storm, my grandfather would not have married my grandmother, and I would not be here," Oglesby said. "So, when you do these remembrance things, there's a sadness inside of you. You know your family is different because of *weather*."

There's also a sense of what could have been.

"The storm was a strike," Stanton said. "It sent pins flying everywhere. Because before that, ah man, Houston was trying to be Galveston. We had The Strand, we had powerful merchants and big ships and long trains. I mean, Galveston was really doing it then."

Fortunately, Galveston does still have what those powerful merchants left behind. It's a city of "good bones," a ragged but right place with plenty of character despite showing the effects of its age and the climate. There's always been great potential in Galveston.

Free State

The Great Storm was a lesson in survival and resiliency not only for those there to witness it, but also for subsequent generations of Galvestonians.

One prominent example of the island's tenacious spirit is Hotel Galvez, says Kimber Fountain, author, local historian, and *Galveston Monthly* editor. The building was completed in 1911 as part of the "grade raising," when civil engineers and an army of workers jacked the city up as much as 17 feet above sea level. The hotel became the last expression of Galveston's golden age and the avatar of its next incarnation.



GALVESTON ISLAND HISTORIC
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GALVESTON ISLAND HISTORIC
PLEASURE PIER
RIDES - FOOD - FUN

GENERAL ADMISSION
TICKET WINDS

GENERAL ADMISSION
TICKET WINDS

Tilman Fertitta's Pleasure Pier is a wildly successful resurrection of an old seawall attraction.



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WEEKEND
Adventure
THREE PARKS

Fountain calls it “a monument to Galveston’s future.”

At the time, Galveston’s leaders did not know what form the future would take, but they had a brand-new hotel dripping with elegance and sophistication to fill. The grade raising and the seawall had come not a moment too soon; they saved Galveston from a second destruction in 1915, when an even more tenacious hurricane spent much of its fury on the seawall’s granite riprap. By then, though, it had become plain that Houston had eclipsed Galveston as the state’s gateway to the sea. Galveston’s status as the Wall Street of the South was over. How could they ever fill Hotel Galvez? For that matter, how could the island survive?

As chronicled in Fountain’s *The Maceos and the Free State of Galveston*, the entire city went rogue on a grand scale. From the onset of Prohibition through most of the ’50s, Galveston was a proto-Vegas, a Monaco minus the royals, unless you counted ruling families like the Sealys, Kempners, and Moodys. This movement was led by upstart usurpers Salvatore and Rosario Maceo, or “Big Sam” and “Papa Rose,” the crown princes of what became known as the Free State of Galveston.

Casinos lined Seawall Boulevard and 61st Street, brothels abounded, and Maceo nightspots like the Studio Lounge, Hollywood Dinner Club, and Balinese Room brought in the biggest stars of the era, including Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Dorsey, and Peggy Lee. The Maceos helmed a massive underground enterprise, yet Fountain sees their reign in glowing terms.

“People kind of misunderstand the meaning of ‘Free State of Galveston,’” Fountain said. There was no coercion, she explained, “no extortion at the end of a sawed-off shotgun. *Everybody* was in on it. And why not? The Maceos did nothing but shovel money onto the island, basically.”

The Maceos had made an agreement with the law, won over the locals, and set the tone for the competition. They had transformed Galveston into their own private paradise. But only for a time. Sam passed away in 1951, and Rose followed him in 1954. Before they died, they handed over control to family members, including cousin Frank Maceo and nephews Vic and Anthony Fertitta, the latter two the respective grandfather and great-uncle of Tilman, the Houston Rockets owner and restaurant entrepreneur. But that first era of Fertitta family domination of Galveston was destined to be short—a politically ambitious state attorney general brought an end to the Free State era in 1957.

Decades of decay and stagnation followed. Having grown by 50% during the Maceo era, the city’s population reached its all-time high of 67,175 in 1960. By 2010, that number would dwindle to 47,000. And yet, despite that long and gloomy half-century trough, the island still bewitched some, as it continues to do today in ever greater numbers.

The African-American Museum celebrates the island’s Black culture and history.



It Takes All Kinds

Those who succumb to Galveston’s allure become “IBCs” (Islanders by Choice), and few are as proud of that designation as Fountain. A native of Bay City, a town a little inland and just down the coast, Fountain “got out as soon as I could.” She’d believed Matagorda County was all Texas had to offer, so she moved to Chicago. After hitting a bump in the road in the Windy City, she came back to Texas. When she “passed through that portal into another dimension”—or crossed the causeway—she had an epiphany. “I was like, ‘This doesn’t feel like Texas at all, and I love it!’”

Fountain has since written three books on the city’s colorful past: the Maceo history, *Galveston’s Red Light District*, and *Galveston Seawall Chronicles*. Each wrestles with the question of how Galveston came to be so beguiling and unique. As an island city, Galveston manifests what Fountain calls a “psychology of isolation” distinct from both Texas and the United States. Even though the distance is only as wide as Galveston Bay, it’s enough to foster a culture of “independence, freethinking, diversity, and individuality,” according to Fountain.

Much is due to its 19th- and early-20th-century history as a port and



Black History Tour

The African American presence in Galveston goes back to its days as a pirate camp and slave port before the city's official founding in 1836.

History was made here on June 19, 1865, when Union Gen. Gordon Granger read **General Order No. 3**, freeing the enslaved people of Texas. Contrary to popular belief, Granger did not read the proclamation from the balcony of Ashton Villa; the actual site of the first reading was the **Osterman Building**, denoted by a state historical marker at 22nd and Strand streets.

The proclamation was also read at today's **Reedy Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church**. The Gothic Revival-style chapel, located at 2013 Broadway Ave. J, was the spiritual home of powerful 19th-century politician and labor leader **Norris Wright Cuney**.

Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight boxing champion and arguably Galveston's most famous son, scandalized Jim Crow America first by demonstrating his utter superiority in the ring and then by marrying a white woman, an offense to the racist norms of the day. A statue of the homegrown champ stands on the grounds of **Old Central Cultural Center** at 2601 Avenue M.

East End beaches offer timeless joys close to town, while West End beaches offer more isolation.





Galveston Island Brewing is at the forefront of an island beer renaissance.

immigration hub. Fountain marvels at the array of international faiths in Galveston. The same applies to the dining scene: Beyond copious seafood, Galveston offers German, Vietnamese, Cajun, Greek, and, perhaps the most Galveston of all, Cajun Greek. And its Italian food gives Houston's a run for its money at two-thirds the price.

"We run the gamut," Fountain said. "It's very unusual to find a town of this size with such a range, and all of that goes back to all those generations of immigrants who made their homes here."

So much of what Galveston is today was made by first- and second-generation Americans. Before the Maceo Brothers presided over the Free State era, Irish architect Nicholas Clayton froze the city's golden age in time. He is responsible for the Romanesque Revival Ashbel Smith building at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, several churches, and dozens of the city's

grandest Victorian homes. His crowning work: the 1892 Bishop's Palace, a 19,000-square-foot Victorian house with National Historic Landmark status. When someone raves about Galveston's architecture, they are talking mostly about Clayton.

Of course, there's also the late George P. Mitchell, son of a goatherd from Greece. Mitchell, a BOI, earned billions drilling for oil and then plowed much of that fortune back into his hometown. Over time, his foundation has spent \$175 million saving 30 Strand-area edifices from the wrecking ball. This in turn created a suitable environment for Dickens on The Strand, Galveston's beloved Yuletide tradition celebrating the Victorian era found in Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*. Mitchell's contributions, which also included reviving the annual Mardi Gras celebration, were a rare sea breeze during 50 years of doldrums.

Welcome to "Galvatraz"

By 1983, no city in the U.S. was home to more people in subsidized housing

Newer restaurants like BLVD. and Katie's Seafood House keep things fresh; a statue of Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight boxing champ.



than Galveston. The lackluster job market left many old families, like Wizzard owner Oglesby's, with no choice but to leave the island they loved for better opportunity. Soon after, the self-proclaimed "Treasure Island of America" had spawned a different nickname.

In 1993, a *Galveston Daily News* reporter talked to the city's teens about their feelings toward their city. Most didn't have much nice to say, including 17-year-old Amy Tong. "I call it 'Galvatraz,'" she said. "Once you're stuck here, you never leave."

Over time, Galvatraz has evolved from insult to lifestyle brand. Brad Carr, a commercial photographer from Houston who moved to Galveston shortly after Hurricane Harvey, started selling his trademarked Galvatraz apparel in 2020. In ad copy for his line, he calls his new home "The Island Escape You Can't Escape" because, he writes, "it imprisons you with its charm."

His voice rang with the fervor of a religious convert when I reached him on the phone. "You find everything you need," Carr said, "and you never want to go back over the causeway!"

Amanda Nichole Boling, a bartender at Gaido's and native of nearby Texas City, thinks the same way. "We call it Galvatraz for just that reason," she said. "I tell people I'm going to the H-E-B in Texas City, and they act like I've been to a foreign country."

Carr thinks Galveston will always have a little bit of pirate in it from the days when Jean Lafitte used the island as a smuggler's paradise. "You feel like you can get away with anything, whether or not that's really true," he said. "You get immersed in that history, and you just feel like you are in a different world because there are not many places in the U.S. with this kind of architecture and scenery."

The term Galvatraz has wide approval among the wry younger set, who are playing a large role in the island's current renaissance. Boling, who has also lived in New Orleans, described downtown Galveston's history-steeped assemblage of restaurants, bars, museums, galleries, and lofts as a miniature French Quarter. "It's got all of that including a bunch of hipsters who are trying to gentrify."

This includes a group of investors who want to rebrand a central part of the old town west of Market Street as "WeMa." "Please God, no, make it stop!" Boling laughed. "I am fairly certain the people who thought of that were not from around here."

Maybe so, maybe no. In a story about some of the earliest attempts to gentrify Galveston's then-calcified and decayed downtown way back in 1977, the *New York Times* reported that Galvestonians had "taken to calling their city SoHo—since it is, after all, south of Houston; and like New York's SoHo, its converted buildings are becoming a haven for those in the arts."

No other Texas city
and precious few in the
Southern states rival
Galveston for historic
Victorian architecture.





Chill Out

The best way to enjoy Galveston's laid-back charm is at a relaxed pace.

Bring your own bike or rent one at **Jungle Surf Rentals** (1020 Seawall Blvd.). All but a couple of the shops, restaurants, and bars listed below are easily accessible on two wheels, or two feet.

Shopping: Strand mainstay **Hendley Market** (2010 Strand St.) beguiles with its eclectic assortment ranging from rare Texana to gag gifts. **Upscale Tangerine** (2218 Postoffice St.) offers West Coast-tinged garb, and **Galveston Bookshop** (317 23rd St.) peddles vinyl records.

Dining: You can't say you know Galveston cuisine until you've eaten at **Gaido's** (3828 Seawall Blvd.). Locals drool over newer spots such as **BLVD. Seafood** (2804 Avenue R 1/2) and **Katie's Seafood House** (2000 Wharf Road). **Maceo Spice & Import Company** (2706 Market St.) is like a living museum that dishes out the tastiest muffuletta this side of the Big Easy.

Drinking: Wash down that muffuletta steps away at craft cocktail bar **Daiquiri Time Out** (2701 Market St.). The venerable **Poop Deck** (2928 Seawall Blvd.) is the mother of all Seawall dives, while **Galveston Island Brewing** (8423 Stewart Road) is highly regarded for its beers and family- and dog-friendly ambiance. **Club 68** (3112 Market St.) offers soul and R&B, with beer, wine, and "set-ups," in a welcoming environment.

Local couple and DIY Network stars Michael and Ashley Cordray flip houses in part to save them.



They are today, too, and no place is more indicative of this latest boom than The Proletariat, a 5-year-old gallery, coffee shop, bar, and performance space on the ground floor of what was formerly the 1869 Tremont Opera House but is now the National Hotel Artist Lofts. When I visited, a few tattooed denizens of the lofts skateboarded shirtless in the street.

Brian "Visker" Mahanay, co-manager of The Proletariat, is an artist known widely for designing art cars that have placed at the Houston Art Car Parade and are now in museums. He burned out on Houston and moved to the island about 14 years ago. "Something like that," he said. "I dunno, when you get down here you lose track of time." Mahanay also owns Visker & Scrivener, a boutique trading in quills, scrolls, inks, and other "handcrafted wares for the modern scribe," as he put it.

The Proletariat has invigorated what had long been a very staid and polite Galveston arts scene with youthful vitality fueled by Mahanay's punk energy. "Galveston's art scene is really cool and it's huge, but it lacked a nucleus that was



The 61st Street Pier offers 24/7 year-round fishing right on Seawall Boulevard.

something other than starfish and fish paintings,” Mahanay said. “I am not looking for art that matches a couch from IKEA. I want the real up-and-comers. I kind of hate the term ‘street-level,’ but that’s what it is, I guess.”

He’s finding these artists closer and closer to home. When he first started, he needed to fall back on Houston artists to fill the gallery’s walls, but no longer. “We are closer and closer to 100% local artists now,” he said.

A New Era

Contemporary art. Multicultural food. Timeless architecture. Fascinating pirate and gangster lore. Today, Galveston is punching above its weight class.

This is all helped along by *Restoring Galveston*, which is bringing Galveston’s quirk and charm to the national audience it’s always deserved. Viewers have seen the Cordrays purchase and restore everything from grand mansions and humble shotguns in the East End to the self-explanatory “Kettle House” on the island’s West End. Once a curiosity off-limits to the masses, it’s now a vacation rental thanks to

the Cordrays. “How could we not fix up the Kettle House?” Michael asked. “We’ve had people tell us staying there is a bucket-list item.”

Their efforts are paying off—the success of their show, and generous market conditions, have brought in real estate competitors. To the Cordrays, the more the merrier. “There are way more houses here to fix than we could possibly ever get to,” Michael said. “I might disagree with some of what these people do with those houses, but at least they are being saved. We just want Galveston to thrive.”

Meanwhile, on the eternal seawall, Galveston still brings in the day-trippers and tourists. And like the saying goes, the more things change... While the city’s rim is no longer lined with Maceo casinos and speak-easies, it is richly encrusted, like salt on a margarita glass, with Fertitta-owned restaurants as well as his San Luis Resort, where Backe tussled with police, and his Pleasure Pier jutting out into the Gulf not far from where his ancestors’ Balinese Room once perched. If the seawall is a Come and Take It flag, the piers these stubborn men keep extending into the Gulf of Mexico are its masts.

What was it that William Faulkner once said about the past—that in Mississippi, it was never dead, nor even past? In Galveston, those words come back to me, albeit garbled. In Galveston, the past isn’t dead, nor even past. It’s just gone legit. 🐠



REMNANTS

REFLECTIONS



OF THE
RIO GRANDE

WAGAS

WITH THEIR GLINTING WATERS

and meandering channels, resacas are a ubiquitous part of the landscape in Texas' semitropical southern tip, where the Rio Grande flows into the Gulf of Mexico. These vestiges of the mighty river, which in Texas are found only in Cameron County, wind through towns, croplands, and coastal prairies.

Though they are sometimes mistaken for rivers or lakes, resacas are actually ancient, abandoned distributaries of the Rio Grande, says Jude Benavides, an associate professor of hydrology and environmental sciences at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. "Distributaries are the opposite of tributaries; they are part of a river that branches off and flows away from the main channel," he says. "They were formed over the course of anywhere from a few hundred to 10,000 years ago as the Rio Grande repeatedly changed its course through natural flooding cycles. These former channels of the river were eventually cut off completely from the rest of the river."

South Texas is home to five primary resaca systems: Resaca de los Fresnos in San Benito; Resaca de los Cuates in Los Fresnos; Resaca del Rancho Viejo and Resaca de la Palma in and around Brownsville; and Town Resaca in the heart of downtown Brownsville. The resacas vary in size and shape—from oxbow lakes to long, narrow channels—and collectively cover about 250 river miles.

"Today, resacas are essentially frozen in time," Benavides explains. "Barring some catastrophic change in the landscape, no new resacas will form. That's because we now manage the flood cycle of the river with dams, levees, and diversion systems, which are necessary for human settlement and agriculture to be possible in South Texas."

Resacas, which are mostly freshwater and sometimes slightly brackish, have been sources of water for humans and wildlife for thousands of years. Around the turn of the 20th century, settlers started utilizing resacas for irrigation, flood control,

and water storage—all practices that still exist today. And like anywhere else where there is water, fish and wildlife thrive. Resacas are home to an array of flora and fauna, which in turn attract wildlife watchers, anglers, and paddlers. Many neighborhoods are built along resacas, where people launch canoes or kayaks right from their backyards. Generally, resacas are not free-flowing like a river, but sometimes water moves through them after rainfall or as a result of pumping.

City parks provide walking trails and green space along resacas at places like Paseo de la Resaca Trail System in Brownsville and W.H. Heavin Memorial Park in San Benito. The best opportunity to see a resaca in its natural state is Resaca de la Palma State Park in Brownsville. The park is part of the World Birding Center and annually welcomes about 20,000 visitors to explore the park's trails and view wildlife from decks over its namesake resaca. More than 300 bird species have been documented in the park.

"We've had visitors from as far away as New Zealand come to see green jays and plain chachalacas, which are residential year-round birds," park Superintendent Kelly Malkowski says. "Earlier this year, we were graced with a very handsome blue bunting, which is a much rarer sighting."

Benavides grew up on a resaca, then moved away for close to two decades. Now he's back home with a renewed appreciation for them, and he's raising his own family on the banks of Brownsville's Resaca del Rancho Viejo, where his kids love to fish for alligator gar, catfish, tilapia, or whatever will take their hook.

"Resacas were created naturally but are now human-maintained, which benefits those who live here and those who travel here to enjoy all they have to offer," Benavides says. "Whether you fly or drive into Brownsville, you can't help but notice the resacas all around you. If you dig a little deeper to truly understand what they are, you'll appreciate them all the more."

— Lydia Saldaña





OPENING SPREAD: A resaca known as Olmito Lake in Olmito.
ABOVE: A stand-up paddleboarder plies the calm waters of Resaca de los Cuates in Los Fresnos.



LEFT: Sunset over Resaca de los Cuates in Los Fresnos. **RIGHT:** Birdwatchers at Resaca de la Palma State Park take in sightings of the multitude of resident and migratory birds attracted to resacas.





LEFT: An American alligator lurks in a resaca at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, which encompasses more than 97,000 acres in the Rio Grande Valley. **RIGHT:** Mexican bluewing butterflies are a common resident of Rio Grande Valley wetlands and resacas in places like Resaca de la Palma State Park and Sabal Palm Sanctuary.







LEFT: Ducks drift in the shadows of palm trees on the Fort Brown Resaca near the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville. **RIGHT:** A ringed kingfisher grapples with its catch from a resaca at Sabal Palm Sanctuary in Brownsville.

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PLATES



COCKTAILS come in rainbow colors at Pier 6 Seafood & Oyster House.

The Oyster Prince

A second-generation businessman brings tide-to-table cuisine to San Leon

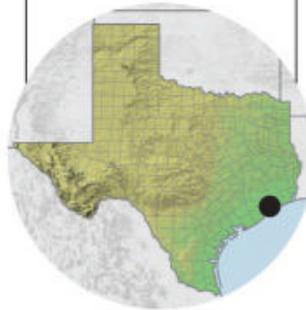
By Mai Pham

Just before sunset on a warm spring evening in San Leon, the sky is awash in peach-purple hues. On the large waterfront patio of Pier 6 Seafood & Oyster House, groups of patrons feast happily on large platters of raw and wood-grilled oysters and sip frozen cocktails.

The scene is just as lively inside. At the bar, a skilled oysterman shucks fresh oysters so quickly and efficiently, it's mesmerizing to watch. In the dining room, beneath a picturesque canopy of greenery and natural woven chandeliers, all the booths are filled. Diners who arrive without a reservation are quoted wait times in excess of an hour.

That's somewhat new for this tiny coastal town 40 miles southeast of Houston, which has become a must-visit destination for foodies since Pier 6 opened in November. The

**PIER 6
SEAFOOD
& OYSTER HOUSE**
113 Sixth St.,
San Leon.
281-339-1515;
pier6seafood.com



oceanfront location, quality menu, and competitive prices have made it such a hit that the 170-seat restaurant serves upwards of 1,000 guests on Saturday nights and sometimes as many as 700 guests per day during the week.

It's an amazing feat for any new restaurant, let alone one that's situated in a unincorporated town with a population of 5,000. And it's a testament to the vision of its 34-year-old proprietor, Raz Halili, whose family owns one of the largest oyster businesses in the country. But some people are more likely to recognize Raz as "Rescuebae," a nickname he earned on social media after picking up stranded people via boat in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

Born in Galveston and raised 20 miles northwest in Dickinson, Raz proudly identifies himself as Albanian American—his father, Johnny Halili, is an Albanian immigrant and his mother, Lisa Halili, is an East Texan.

"My Albanian family bloodline goes back 200 years," he says of his vast network of aunts, uncles, and cousins, many of whom immigrated to America and joined the family business. He often visited Kosovo as a teen and recalls the destruction wrought by the Kosovo War in the late '90s, including buildings with gaping holes in them, whole villages burned down, and bridges and monuments destroyed. Regardless, he still has happy memories of the region. "Me and my cousins, we'd play soccer in the streets, go to the capital, go swimming, then go home and have delicious food cooked by my aunts," he says.

Back in Texas, Raz grew up on the docks of his family business, Prestige Oysters, working just about every role imaginable, from deckhand to unloading



RAZ HALILI,
owner of Pier 6,
grew up helping
out at his family's
oyster business.

With a focus on fresh, locally sourced, and sustainable seafood, Pier 6's focal point is Prestige oysters, which come straight from docks less than half a mile away.

oysters, operating forklifts, and picking up trash. Hard work is a necessary part of the business, and like his father, he doesn't shy away from it.

Johnny's story resonates through every facet of his son's life. Johnny grew up on a farm in Kosovo in a one-bedroom house with no electricity. In the late '70s, he immigrated to America and made his way to Louisiana, where he heard he could make \$25 a day working on an oyster boat. Starting out as a deckhand, he dreamed big, looking for opportunities to become captain of his own boat, which led him to move to Texas. Of his parents' meeting, Raz says: "He saved money, bought a boat. Meets my mom—a waitress at a diner at NASA—and says, 'Wanna see my boat?' It was the biggest piece of s— boat, but he was proud of it."

Raz will be the first to tell you he didn't aspire to follow in his father's footsteps. Growing up, he dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player, and eventually played NCAA Division I soccer for Houston Baptist University and was scouted for a couple of teams in Europe. Nottingham Forest Football Club in England invited him to play for eight weeks in their reserves, but it was a no-contract, no-strings-attached offer. It didn't provide stability, and Prestige Oysters was growing, so Raz decided to head home. "I felt that I needed to not be selfish anymore and go into the family business," he says.

Prestige is better for his sacrifice. In the years since Raz joined, he's helped the company grow from what was mostly a shipping company (shipping raw product to oyster factories that would process

BAY CITY
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: the Hot Blooded oysters and raw oysters on the half shell; a lobster roll; crab lollipops.

and package them) into one of the largest fully integrated Gulf oyster companies in North America. With docks in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida, Prestige provides a market for about 100 oyster boats during open season, harvesting oysters from their own fleet of 35 boats and purchasing the rest from more than 70 independent fishermen. The company owns three processing facilities and distributes fresh oysters all along the southeastern coast, mid-Atlantic, and California, with frozen product placement in 49 states and Canada.

Raz single-handedly built up the retail

portion of the business. “I wanted to diversify our business and break into food service and retail, and grow the brand of Prestige,” he says. His dad gave him a beat-up truck with no air conditioning and no radio, and told him to hit the streets to sign up new accounts.

Today, Prestige directly supplies Gulf oysters to restaurants such as State of Grace and Hugo’s in Houston. Its products are also carried by wholesale restaurant supplier Sysco, as well as Whole Foods Market, Central Market, and Walmart. Nationally, Prestige supplies oysters to Red Lobster, Carnival Cruise Lines, and Disney World.

Pier 6 is Raz's passion project, featuring his vision, design, and menu—but it also kind of happened by accident. After Hurricane Harvey, Johnny, who'd dabbled in real estate, informed Raz he'd purchased a San Leon restaurant called Bubba's Shrimp Palace. That restaurant had specialized in fried shrimp plates; Raz had no interest in continuing with the concept, but he saw the potential for something new.

"With our ability to pull in seafood and oysters—the location as well, with the beautiful backdrop of Galveston Bay—I felt we could really create a unique space with it," Raz says. "And I just felt like there was something needed down here that was different than the norm."

Gone are the dark wood and taxidermy from Bubba's. In their place are hues of aquamarine, peach, and yellow; natural coastal elements like rope and seashells; and lots of green foliage. A bright pink neon sign declaring "The World Is Your Oyster" hangs above a bed of sun-bleached oyster shells. On the patio facing the water, hanging rattan swing chairs have been a big hit during sunsets.

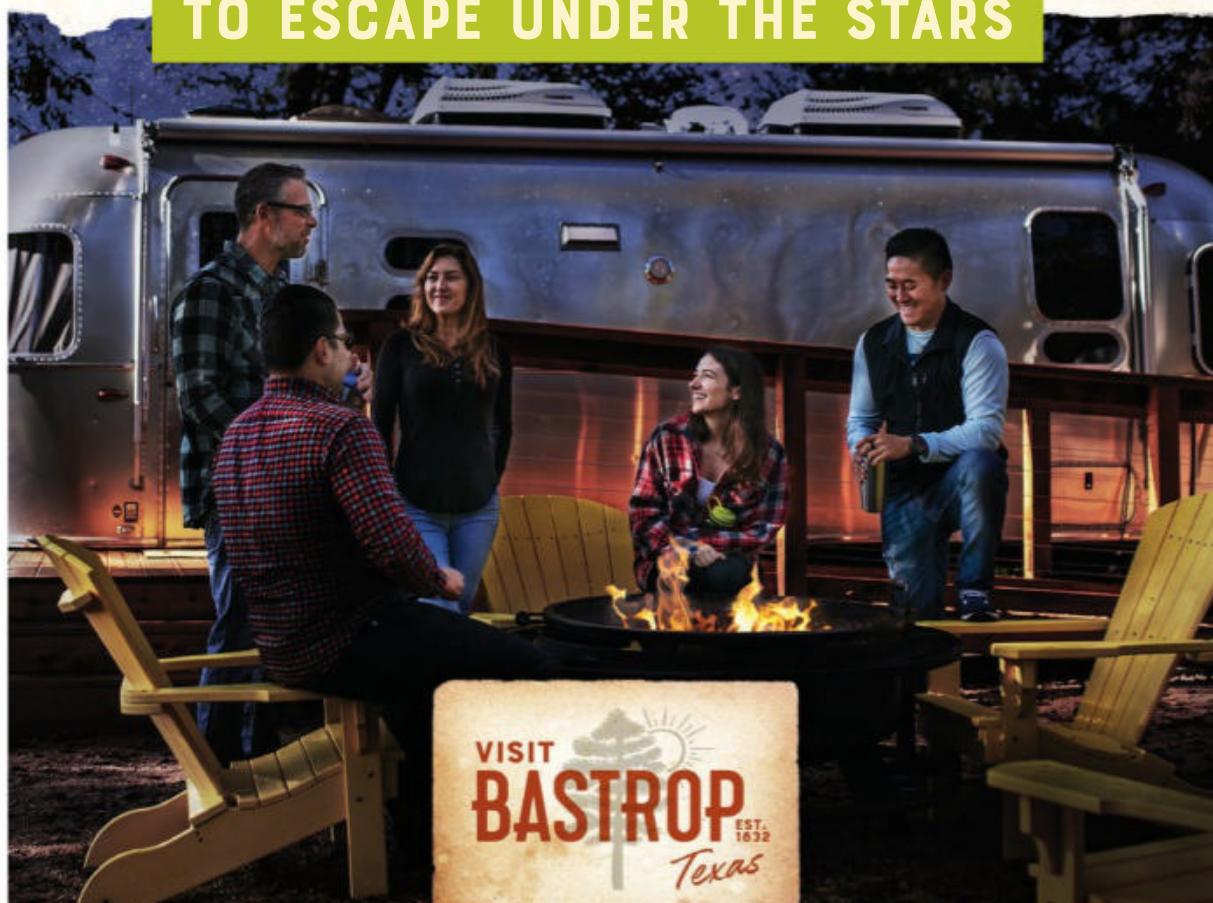
But the real draw at Pier 6 is the menu. Raz and executive chef Joe Cervantez, who has worked at Brennan's of Houston and Killen's Steakhouse in Pearland, created the "tide-to-table" menu from scratch. With a focus on fresh, locally sourced, and sustainable seafood, Pier 6's focal point is Prestige oysters, which come straight from docks less than half a mile away.

"We get the first pick of the best oysters every day," Cervantez says. The oysters can be ordered raw on the half shell or wood-grilled in four styles: The Prestige (Parmigiano-Reggiano and fresh herb shallot butter); New Orleans-style Bienville or Rockefeller; blue crab au gratin; or the Hot Blooded, with garlic, sriracha, and habanero butter. They are the restaurant's best sellers.

"I want everyone that comes through there to really enjoy and know they're getting some of the freshest, highest quality seafood," Raz says. "I want them to have a good time while they're here." 🐚

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Rise and Rind

Watermelon Queen Landen Addison sows seeds of agricultural hope

By Heather Brand



LANDEN ADDISON
was crowned in
November 2019.

Landen Addison was 9 years old when her father began cultivating watermelons at their family farm in Brownfield, about 40 minutes southwest of Lubbock. “I used to get so excited when our boxes of watermelon seedlings arrived and I got to help plant them,” she says.

Although Landen, now 22 years old, grew up alongside her family’s watermelon crop, she didn’t know much about the statewide industry until she was crowned Texas Watermelon Queen in November 2019. As part of Landen’s title, awarded to her by the Texas Watermelon Association, she was expected to make appearances in her sash and tiara at events, festivals, and grocery stores.

But the COVID-19 pandemic gave her the opportunity to do so much more. Since her public appearances were curtailed, Landen fulfilled her duties by going on farm tours and posting about them online. “Good things came out of it,” she says. “The Texas Watermelon Queen before me didn’t go on a single farm tour her entire year. It had gotten to be all in-store promotions. I think we

should focus on educating the public on who is growing the watermelons and how it’s done, and making connections with the farmers.”

The Addison family has been farming in Terry County for three generations, beginning with Landen’s great-grandfather Milton Addison, followed by her grandfather Chriss Addison, and now her father, John Mark Addison, who tends about 4,800 acres. In 1988, he began farming, mainly cotton, and started growing watermelons 14 years ago to diversify his crops. He’s proud of Landen’s initiative to represent watermelon farmers. “It gave Landen a chance to understand and learn from the inside the work each farmer puts in,” John Mark says.

Landen visited more than 20 farms in 16 cities across the state, including McAllen in the south, Balmorhea in the west, and Nacogdoches in the east. Along the way, she learned about the horticultural methods in various regions, like how some farmers use drip irrigation (in which perforated tubes deliver water directly to the roots),



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in Robstown

Hensley Produce
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“I think we should focus on educating the public on who is growing the watermelons and how it’s done, and making connections with the farmers.”

while some use pivot irrigation systems (in which rotating equipment sprays water via sprinklers), and others cover their crops with tarps to reduce moisture evaporation. In the town of Plains, between Lubbock and New Mexico, she witnessed how watermelons were packed into boxes in the fields rather than in packing facilities. And in Seminole, just south of Plains, she saw a supersize 51-pound melon. “Anytime I would go on a trip to the fields I would consistently learn new things,” she says. “Even coming from a farming family, there were plenty of things I didn’t know.”

Landen also didn’t know much about pageants before competing for the title of Texas Watermelon Queen. Daunted by the idea, she penned and memorized a three-minute speech about why she would make a good candidate. Though 30% of a participant’s score is based on personal appearance, personality, poise, and projection, the other 70% is based on communication skills (evaluated through the prepared speech, an interview, and an unscripted response to a question). Since Landen was pursuing a degree in communications from Texas Tech University at the time, she felt it would be a worthwhile experience. “I have always adored the life my dad created for us on the farm,” she says, “and it gave me the chance to meet growers all over the state.”

Photos from Landen’s farm tours can be viewed online at [facebook.com/texaswatermelonqueen](https://www.facebook.com/texaswatermelonqueen).

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BEN WILLIAMS (right) and Wendell Robbins III (left) founded Highway Distillery in 2018. Codi Fuller (center) is the general manager and distiller.

Hemp Cat

The owner of Highway Distillery crafts vodka with an unusual ingredient

By Kayla Stewart

Ben Williams channels the legacy of his great-grandmother through his work at Highway Distillery in Houston.

Lucille B. Smith was considered one of the first Black businesswomen in Texas, according to the Texas State Historical Association. In the 1930s and '40s, she developed and marketed Lucille's All-Purpose Hot Roll Mix; wrote a cookbook, *Lucille's Treasure Chest of Fine Foods*; and started a culinary apprentice training program at Prairie View A&M University.

Now, Ben takes on his great-grandmother's mantle of industry "firsts" as the first Black distillery owner and founder in the Houston area.

"Our family has been really fortunate to have this moment come about twice," Ben said. "Being part of this family just gave you the belief that you can do whatever."

The "whatever" Ben chose is creating a smooth yet flavorful vodka using an uncommon ingredient: hulled hemp-seed. The result of using the grain product, which has high fat content, is a spirit with more body and less burn than your typical vodka, making it much more pleasurable to drink neat.

"I wasn't a big advocate of hemp or anything like that," Ben said. "It's really about what it does for the process."

A Houston native, Ben worked in events promotion and education before helping his brother, Chris Williams, open Lucille's, a restaurant named in honor of their great-grandmother. While Chris still serves as chef and owner of the global-cuisine-inspired Southern eatery, around 2012, Ben decided to try his hand at his own endeavor and landed on vodka, which he enjoyed drinking.

"It started as a hobby, but I realized

that I had to pursue it," Ben said. "You owe it to yourself to go for it because I don't ever want to look back and be like, 'I sure wish I'd tried this thing.'"

He started out learning the basics but quickly realized he didn't love the tasteless and odorless product that had become the standard for "good vodka." Ben thought there had to be a way to craft a better drink, and he found that approach with hemp.

On a cool March afternoon, I stopped by the distillery to visit with Ben and learn more about his process. He greeted me in a gray sweater, jeans, and white kicks, and walked me through the serene space, which included a barn, old but well-maintained whiskey barrels, containers of vodka, and an unmistakable scent of hemp that permeated the building.

Ben spent eight years perfecting his product with his lifelong friend and business partner, Wendell Robbins III. Using a particular strain of hemp, locally sourced corn, and water from an artesian aquifer, distiller and general manager Codi Fuller mashes the product. Then, it ferments for 7 to 10 days. Concurrently, the hemp oil rises to the top. "The thick layer of oil we always

talk about makes the difference,” Ben said. The team moves everything from the fermenter to the still, then the vodka is distilled six times to retain the nuanced taste of the grain and oils from the hemp and corn.

“By distilling only six times, that viscosity difference kind of remains here, and that’s what makes it ...” Ben stopped himself midsentence to pour me a generous shot. As the smooth liquor hit the back of my throat with earthy hints of hemp remaining on my tongue, I mentally finished Ben’s sentence: “That’s what makes it good.” So good, in fact, that despite just launching in 2019, Highway Distillery vodka will soon be distributed to California, Florida, and Georgia.

To help his business grow, Ben received business leadership support through an initiative started by the



Tennessee-based Nearest Green Foundation that aims to promote diversity and advance African American leadership in the American spirits industry. The foundation is named after the African American master distiller who taught a young Jack Daniel how to make Tennessee whiskey in the mid-1800s. Fawn Weaver

co-founded Nearest Green Foundation to honor Green and his descendants, and founded Nearest Green Distillery to continue the spirit-crafting tradition.

“I’m so impressed by what [Ben] has done,” Weaver said. “It’s not just that he is running [Highway Distillery], it’s that he founded it. When you’re talking about

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“I wasn’t a big advocate of hemp or anything like that,” Ben said. “It’s really about what it does for the process.”

what we are experiencing—systematic racism and things of that nature—people want to make it black and white. I personally don’t believe it’s black and white; I believe it’s green. It is a very large economic gap. The only way that we level the playing field is to close the wealth gap.”

Ben and the distillery are also committed to paying it forward to their community. Ben joined forces with his brother’s nonprofit, Lucille’s 1913, to serve more than 215,000 hot meals to the elderly since the start of the pandemic and 10,000 liters of water to those affected by the winter storm this past February.

“The cool thing was, [Highway Distillery] sits on a well, so it’s not on city water and wasn’t at all affected [by the storm],” Ben said. “So, when it happened, I was like, let’s just bottle up some of this water and collaborate with 1913. People needed help, and we wanted to be there for them.”

As Ben explained what’s next for his distillery, he pointed to an adjacent plot of land he plans to acquire. He wants a more automated system to support a bottling line and bigger infrastructure to support the national interest he’s received.

“Whenever [the COVID-19 pandemic] settles down, we’re going to go ahead and get that opened up, and that’s going to be a lot of fun,” he said. “There are so many opportunities right now that it’s just kind of mind boggling, but when you know your stuff, you can focus on what’s right in front of you.”

Highway Distillery vodka is sold in liquor stores in the greater Houston area and at highwaydistillery.com.

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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.

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Several special offers run throughout the year, but one of the most popular is the "Book Ahead and Save" promotion. Travelers who book at least 7 days in advance can get 10% off each night by pre-paying for their trip.



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Remember, The Tremont House is in the heart of every downtown festival so check the calendar for upcoming events on the island or monthly happenings, like Movie Night and Music Night on The Strand.

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A 1938 MONUMENT on Matagorda Bay near Indianola recalls La Salle's South Texas colony.

Crashed and Dashed on the Texas Coast

The tragedy of La Salle and his 17th century French colonial experiment on Matagorda Bay

By David Theis

The Spanish soldiers were braced for a fight as they bushwhacked the brushy banks of Garcitas Creek, just a few miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico. It was April 1689, and Spain had been at war with France on and off for decades as the European rivals competed for colonial dominance in the New World. When word got out that a group of French settlers had built a village in present-day Victoria County—land Spain claimed as its own—the Spanish were determined to snuff it out.

But when the Spaniards climbed the creek's banks, they didn't encounter a colony of enemies. It was more like a wasteland: The settlement's six desultory buildings and garden were abandoned. The pages of ruined books, along with various tools, were scattered about. Of the 200 people who lived there, the Spanish found only three moldering remains, including the corpse of a woman with a bit of dress clinging to her shoulder and an arrow in her back.

Such was the fate of the first European settlement in what we now call Texas—the result of an ambitious but flawed plan by French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle. Though it failed, La Salle's effort shaped the course of Texas history. Not only was the colony—today referred to as Fort St. Louis—home to Texas' first European wedding and first European birth, it also forced the Spanish to cast new eyes on the wilderness of Texas.

“The Spaniards had no interest in the region north of the Rio Bravo until La Salle established his French colony there,” says Stephen Hardin, a history professor at McMurry University in Abilene. “Once they became aware of the settlement's existence, they made enormous efforts to eliminate it root and vine. Those efforts culminated in their missions, presidios,

villas, vaqueros, and all the other trappings of Spanish culture. None of that would have occurred without La Salle.”

Hardin traces the French failure to La Salle himself, whose “dreams of imperial conquest always exceeded the reach of his talents and abilities.” La Salle had previously explored parts of Canada and the northern U.S., traversing thousands of miles and establishing forts and other outposts in the name of France. In 1682 he sledged and canoed from the Great Lakes down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers to the Gulf of Mexico. He claimed the Mississippi River drainage for France and named the territory La Louisiane for Louis XIV, the French king.

La Salle then persuaded King Louis to establish a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi. There, the French could contest Spanish and English colonial efforts, and also ship beaver pelts and other goods to France. With the king’s backing, La Salle set off from France in the summer of 1684 with around 320 people. La Salle, often described as arrogant, had a low opinion of his colonists—a collection of soldiers, priests, laborers, and merchants, along with about six women and several children. In his book *The Wreck of the Belle, the Ruin of La Salle*, the late historian Robert S. Weddle described many of the colonists as “drawn from the scum of the channel ports and beggars at church doors.” La Salle himself wrote that his colonists were, “untaught in any craft, intractable to any discipline.”

Trusting his ability to read the wilderness, La Salle assumed he would recognize the Mississippi’s mouth. But deceived by bad maps and a broken

“The Spaniards had no interest in the region north of the Rio Bravo until La Salle established a French colony there.”

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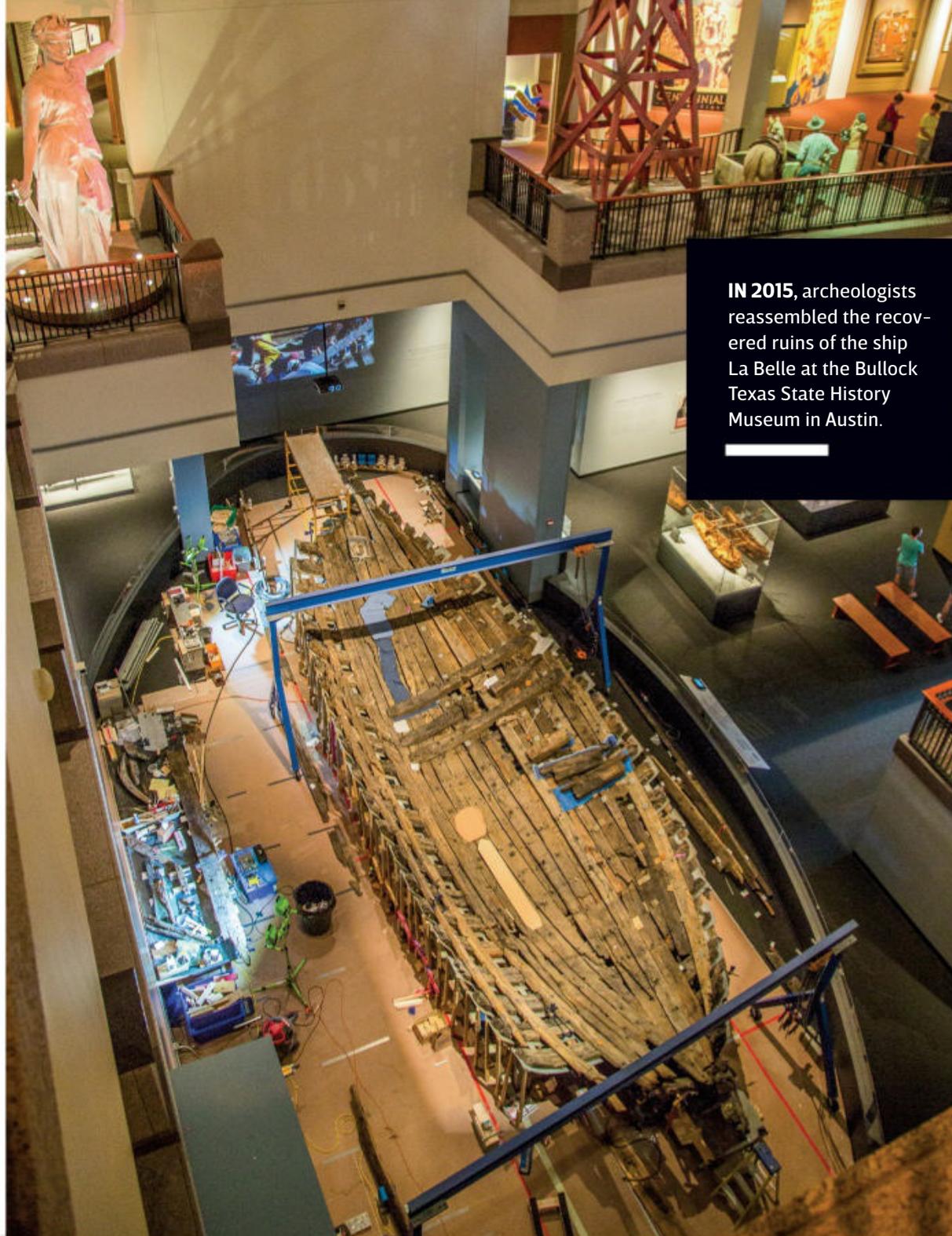
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IN 2015, archeologists reassembled the recovered ruins of the ship *La Belle* at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin.

Tracing LaSalle's Doomed Expedition to Texas

La Salle's Garcitas Creek settlement is located on private property and closed to the public. There's no historical marker nearby the site, which is off Farm-to-Market Road 616, about 22 miles east of Victoria. It "should be a national historic site like Jamestown or Plymouth plantation," says Stephen Harrigan, a Texas author who penned a history of the state called *Big Wonderful Thing*. "As it is, it's just a scraggly hilltop."

But you can still get a feel for this important history. The Texas Historical Commission has established the La Salle Odyssey, a series of exhibitions in museums across the Texas Gulf Coast. Victoria's Museum of the Coastal Bend has the richest exhibition, including seven of the

cannons that La Salle left behind and facial reconstructions of two of the colonists, complete with names and biographies. The ship *La Belle*, which was recovered from Matagorda Bay in 1995 and meticulously preserved, is now on prominent display at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin.

On Indianola's narrow beach, near where the French tragedy began, a 22-foot-tall granite statue of La Salle was erected in 1938. Less imposing is the statue of him in downtown Navasota, 130 miles to the north, which makes an argument for being more or less the place of his death.

For more information, visit texastimetravel.com/travel-themes/la-salle-odyssey.

astrolabe, he overshot his target, arriving by accident at Matagorda Bay. During its seven-month voyage, the expedition lost one ship to pirates. Another ship returned to France, as planned. A third ship, *Aimable*, foundered on a sandbar in the shallow bay. When the expedition's fourth and final ship, *La Belle*, ran aground in the bay and sank, nearly all of the colony's supplies were lost.

The colonists used timbers from *Aimable* for building and relied on hunting and fishing for food. Their attempts to plant wheat and beans failed, Weddle recounts, and bison—no easy target—was their main protein. Some colonists were trampled. Some died from eating prickly pear fruit without taking off the spines.

Others died from overwork. After they'd used all their salvaged timber, La Salle ordered his men to cut down trees and drag them 3 miles across the tall-grass prairie. At least 30 men died doing this kind of work, "as much from [La Salle's] punishment as from the affliction," according to Henri Joutel, a La Salle lieutenant whose journal of the expedition was first published in France in 1715. Most fearfully, settlers would easily get lost in the featureless landscape—tall grass as far as the eye could see.

Dealings with the native Karankawas were also fraught. La Salle had traded with the Indigenous tribes in Canada, but on Garcitas Creek he was unable to make peace with the natives. In all, half of La Salle's colonists died in the first six months.

What caused La Salle to make so many tragic mistakes? Some questioned his mental health. The captain of his flotilla wrote in a letter to the French court: "Everyone believes he is unbalanced." The 19th-century historian Francis Parkman speculated La Salle's travails during previous adventures, including a nearly fatal fever, "had unsettled his judgement."

The French did manage a bit of civilization, with their birth, marriage, chapel, and masses. Still, within two years of arrival, the situation became so desperate that La Salle decided to seek help. On Jan. 12, 1687, he and his 17 most able-bodied men set out in search of rescue.

Their plan was to hike to the Mississippi River, then paddle north to a French outpost La Salle had previously established on the Illinois River. In his journal, Joutel remembered the pain of leaving behind the 23 remaining settlers. Both groups expressed their farewells “so sadly and tenderly it seemed as if all carried a secret foreboding that they would never see each other again.”

Amazingly, six of La Salle’s group reached the fort on the Illinois, 1,200 miles away, after a year of travel. But La Salle wasn’t one of them. Partway there, a mutinous faction within the party shot him in the head and left his corpse for the wolves. The exact location of La Salle’s murder remains a mystery. Weddle’s best estimation is that the tragedy occurred “perhaps east of the Trinity River.”

In Texas, after the Karankawas learned of La Salle’s death, and of the infighting among the French, they destroyed what was left of the settlement. The remaining colonists might have been saved, but the French soldiers in Illinois never learned of their dire straits. The six survivors of the Texas colony who made it to the northern fort, including La Salle’s brother, a priest named Jean Cavelier, kept their situation and La Salle’s death a secret. Cavelier’s silence was part of his scheme to claim La Salle’s furs and sell them back in France. He retired to his home “rich and intact,” in the words of historian Anka Muhlstein, who wrote the biography *La Salle: Explorer of the North American Frontier*.

The Spanish soldiers knew nothing of the colony’s tribulations when they discovered the abandoned French settlement. Moved by the scene, one of the Spaniards wrote a poem and recited it over the remains of the dead Frenchwoman. The poem, described by historian Stephen Harrigan as perhaps the first poem ever written in Texas, later appeared in a Spanish history of Texas: “*And thou, cadaver, oh, so cold / Who for a time did make so bold / And now consumed by wild beasts / Which upon thee made thy feasts / ... For everlasting glory won / Transient from this life has gone.*”



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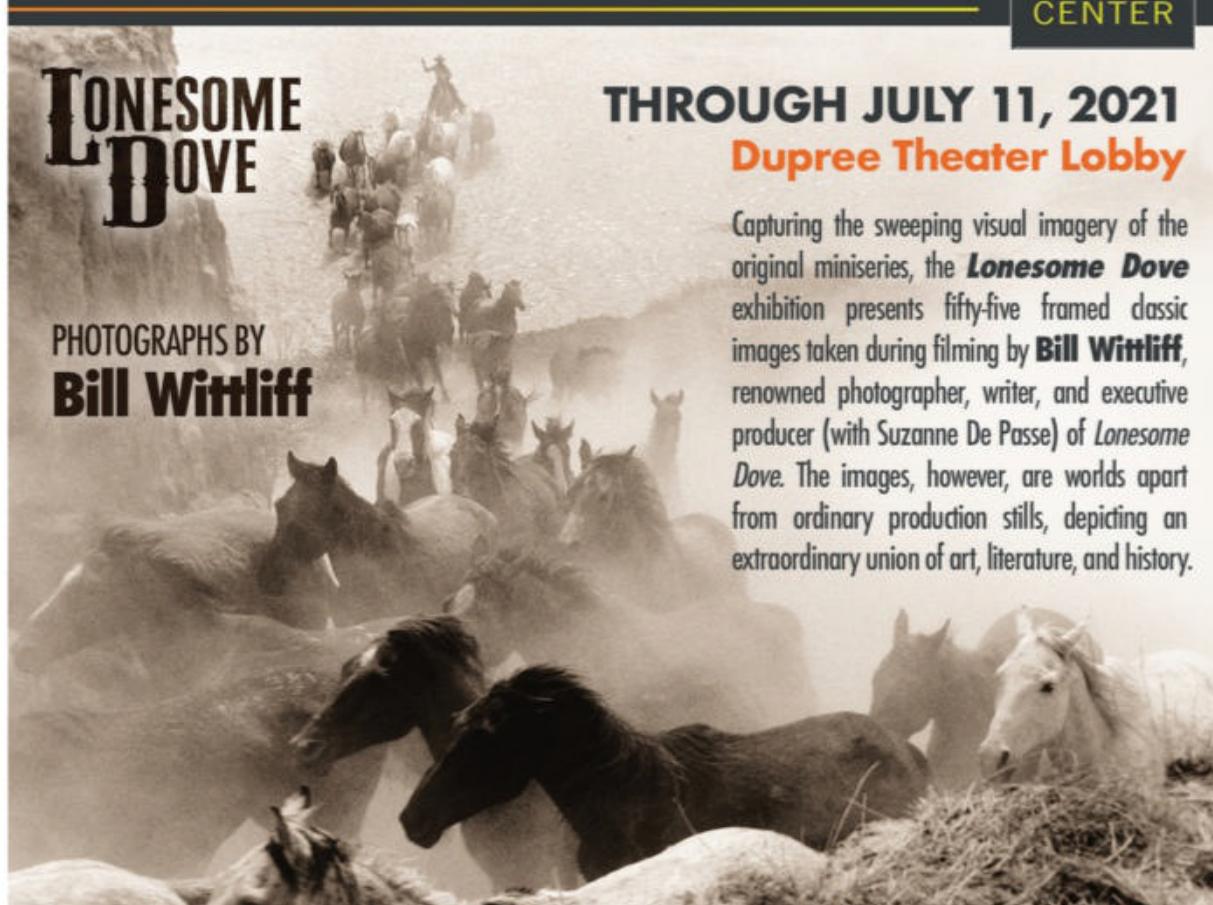
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THE DAYTRIPPER'S TOP 5

Port Arthur

Cajun in the corner

BY CHET GARNER



There's a part of Texas where the freshwater of the Sabine River mixes with the salt of the Gulf of Mexico. It's a place where cowboys, Cajuns, and the coast collide, making it feel as much like Louisiana as it does the Lone Star State. It's time to pull your ship into port—Port Arthur, that is.

Museum of the Gulf Coast

This museum takes visitors on a journey through time, from prehistoric lizards, to the Spindletop oil boom, to modern celebrities who hail from the Gulf Coast. Folks from all over the world visit to trace Janis Joplin's steps from her home in Port Arthur to rock 'n' roll fame—and to see the replica of her Cabriolet Porsche with its distinctive psychedelic paint job. Art aficionados will appreciate the works from famed artist and Port Arthur native Robert Rauschenberg, but I prefer the sports room featuring local legends like Jimmy Johnson and Bum Phillips.

Boudain Hut

If you're in need of some "pop swamp" music, cold beer, and a Cajun delicacy called boudin, then this is your spot. For 35 years, this small juke joint has been making its signature boudin, a sausage casing stuffed with pork, dirty rice, and "secret" seasonings. Placed on a cracker with some yellow mustard, it's a treat for your taste buds. The brave can order real Cajun hog's head cheese by the pound—don't ask what's in it, just enjoy.

Sabine Pass Battleground

Texas wasn't a major battleground in the Civil War, and that's partly because of what happened on this site. Visitors can walk the state historic site where a group of about 50 Confederates repelled a Union

force of four gunboats mounting 18 guns and carrying 4,000 troops, keeping them from occupying Texas. Over 75 years later, the military used the site during World War II to store ammunition that supplied U.S. ships in the Gulf. The old artillery bunkers are still intact, making this a must-stop for military and history buffs.

Sea Rim State Park

One of the most remote state parks in Texas, Sea Rim is perfect for anyone looking for an uncrowded day on the coast. With 4,000 acres of marshland and 5 miles of Gulf shoreline, it's easy to lose yourself and let your cares disappear. Take a stroll on the Gambusia Nature Trail Boardwalk, where you're almost guaranteed to see alligators and some of the hundreds of bird species that migrate through. For surf fishermen, there may be no better place in the state.

Tia Juanita's Fish Camp

This restaurant mixes Tex-Mex cuisine with Cajun flavors, a combination it calls "Mexicajun." Start with the "oysters Juanita" for chargrilled oysters topped with bacon and jalapeño, then grab some charro beans prepared like Creole red beans and rice with local Zummo sausage. Then finish with some blackened gator tacos that taste like traditional fish tacos but with way more "bite."

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 Port Arthur episode visit thedaytripper.com.
Follow along on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @chetripper.



All Wake, All Day

Ashley Kidd breaks new ground as a champion wakesurfer

By Pam LeBlanc

Growing up in Corpus Christi, Ashley Kidd splashed through waves on a boogie board and told her mom that one day she'd become a real surfer. Then, when she was about 5, her aunt showed her a hermit crab, and she discovered that fish and sharks also lurked under the Gulf of Mexico's surface. "After that, I was traumatized by any type of water that had sea life in it," Kidd says. "I wouldn't even go into a lake until I was 12."

Eventually, Kidd's mother persuaded her reluctant daughter to dip her toe into Medina Lake, where they had a vacation home, by promising (wink, wink) that no fish lived there. Kidd soon learned to wakeboard—akin to water-skiing on a surfboard—on the same lake. Then in 2009, when she was 15, Kidd's older brother, Billy Wilson, joined her for an outing. "He came out on the boat with us and was wakesurfing and said, 'You have to try this.' I did, and from that moment I was obsessed."

"What makes me stand out is that I've been the first girl to land some of my tricks, and I always try to perfect those tricks and go as big as I can. Bigger stuff looks cooler."

Kidd proved to be a natural at the sport, which involves surfing behind a motorboat. Wakesurfers don't hold onto a tow rope; instead, they surf the continuous waves generated by the boat. A year later, in 2010, Kidd won second place in the women's amateur division of the World Wake Surfing Championship in Minnesota. When she was 18, Kidd moved to Austin to be closer to Lake Austin and Lake Travis, both prime spots for wakesurfing.

Kidd won the first of her five world championships when she was 19, and today, at 26, she is known for high-flying tricks and an aggressive style. As a professional, she competes around the globe, teaches up-and-coming athletes, stars in instructional videos, and works with an array of gear sponsors. Currently, Kidd is in the midst of the summer wakesurfing season and working toward the World Wake Surfing Championship, which will be held in October at a to-be-determined Texas location.

TH: *How do you describe the sport to people who are unfamiliar with it?*

AK: It's a cross between surfing in the ocean and skateboarding. You get up on a wakesurf board [holding a tow rope attached to a boat], then you drop the rope so you're surfing the wake behind the boat. If I'm not trying any tricks, I could literally stand there all day. The cool thing is, it's a pretty mellow sport—if you fall, you're falling into the water, so just about anybody can try it. You're really close to the boat, so it's more social, and you're only going 11 mph, so it's not hard on your body.

TH: *How is wakesurfing judged in competitions, and what makes you stand out from the crowd?*

AK: A lot of it is subjective. The organizers set up two buoys, and you get two 45-second passes to do all your tricks. You get scores for the intensity of tricks that you do, the variety of tricks, the execution, and difficulty. What makes me stand out is that I've been the first girl to land some of my tricks, and I always try to perfect those tricks and go as big as I can. Bigger stuff looks cooler.

TH: *What wakesurfing accomplishment are you most proud of?*

AK: It's always a satisfying feeling to bring new tricks into the women's category. A lot of the guys think it's really cool that I'm pushing the girls. They're usually pretty positive and supportive. A lot of people tell me I should compete with the guys. Four years ago, I entered an event that didn't have a girls' division. I did it more to make a statement, and I did compete against the guys. It was before I had some of the tricks I have now, but I beat a couple of them. And in 2014 the Competitive Wake Surfing Association named me Female Athlete of the Year—the first time they ever gave that out.

TH: *Do you have a signature move?*

AK: One of my signature moves is a really big air reverse. You flip the board up in midair and the tail of it goes so high, then

you land and spin it so you're facing front again. I'm also the only girl doing a three-shove, where the board does a complete 360 underneath me while I keep facing forward. That trick took me a couple years to perfect.

TH: *How do you perfect a move?*

AK: It's all done behind the boat. A lot is trial and error, trying a trick a million times. And I spend a lot of time on the water.

TH: *Do you train year-round?*

AK: Yes. I wear a wetsuit and bring blankets in the winter, and I have a heater on my boat. When I get out of the water, I put the heater vent under the blanket. Even if I'm not wakesurfing, I still work out every day. I'm big into Orange-theory Fitness, yoga, weight training, Pilates, spin classes, and snowboarding.

TH: *How does Austin stack up on the global wakesurfing scene?*

AK: Austin is one of the biggest places for wakesurfing that I've seen. A lot of people move here from California, and they miss surfing so they start wakesurfing. When you go out on Lake Austin and Lake Travis, everyone is riding. You want flat water, and Lake Austin is one of my favorite places because it stays smooth even when it's windy.

TH: *How has the wakesurfing scene changed over the years?*

AK: When I started, I didn't have the best waves or the best equipment. They didn't make boats for wakesurfing, so the boat would lean over on its side. [Before manufacturers started making specialty boats, wakesurfers would weigh down one side of the boat with water bags to create a bigger wake.] People would be like, "They're sinking!" The tricks that people are doing now have progressed to a level that I didn't think we'd ever get to, and we're seeing celebrities and people all over the world doing it.

TH: *How does surfing behind a boat compare to surfing in an ocean?*

AK: Surfing in the ocean is a lot harder because you have to read the wave constantly, and it's always changing. You have to paddle out, and it's a different wave every time. In wakesurfing, the wave stays the same the whole time, so you can focus on the same trick until you have it perfected.

TH: *What do you do when you're not wakesurfing?*

AK: I like hiking, especially in the Hill Country around Austin at places like Hamilton Pool or Bull Creek. I just like being out in nature where it's quiet and pretty, and my dog, Bailey, loves it. She's a Siberian husky. She goes with me every time I'm on the boat, too.

TH: *Where are your favorite places to travel around the state?*

AK: I love the beach around Corpus Christi and all of the Hill Country areas, including Medina Lake and Austin. I love all of the hills and trees all over the place.

TH: *You have a regular presence on Instagram and YouTube. What's your approach to social media and how important is it to your brand?*

AK: I try to be as authentic as possible on my social media and grow the sport as much as I can through it. It is very important to me to represent wakesurfing in a great way for children and families, and to get more women riding. 🐾

Keep up with Ashley Kidd at ashleykidd.com and on Instagram, @ashleykiddsurf. Kidd will be among more than 180 athletes competing in the World Wake Surfing Championship, which will be held Oct. 7-9 at a Texas location yet to be announced.

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VINTAGE

BY JAC DARSNEK, TRACES OF TEXAS



Galveston Rising

GALVESTON ISLAND, 1903

In the aftermath of the devastating 1900 hurricane, Galveston faced the arduous work of rebuilding. Most famously, the town began constructing its signature seawall in 1902. Another crucial response involved raising the elevation of some 500 city blocks anywhere from 8 to 17 feet. To accomplish this herculean task, engineers enclosed two- to three-block sections with earthen levees, and workers using jackscrews and stilts manually lifted every structure, fence, streetcar track, and utility and water pipe. More than 2,000 structures were lifted as part of the grade raising, which required more than 15 million cubic yards of sand. Some of those buildings are still standing, such as St. Patrick Catholic Church on 35th Street, which was raised 5 feet using 700 jacks. The last cubic yard of sand was shoveled into place on Aug. 8, 1910. Galveston had risen. **L**

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