



BOIS D'ARC DREAMS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RUSSELL A. GRAVES

Going home again means sharing Bonham with family and friends.



AUSTIN
4.5 hours

DALLAS
1.5 hours

EL PASO
9.5 hours

HOUSTON
4.5 hours

BROWNSVILLE
9 hours

LUBBOCK
5 hours

Driving back to Bonham is always a homecoming for me because of my long history with the town and the area. My wife hails from Bonham, I grew up about 10 miles northeast of there, and for the two decades of our married life, we've maintained an intermittent presence there as our parents still reside where each of us grew up.

Bonham and Fannin County may not be noted vacation destinations, but the area has plenty to offer travelers looking for a quaint, quiet weekend that can offer both adventure and relaxation.

As far as Texas counties go, Fannin County is one of the originals. Formed just barely over a year after Texas won its independence, the county today is actually smaller than it once was. At its original size, it encompassed all or parts of 22 North Texas counties and stretched all the way to the Texas Panhandle. Today, small towns and communities are

peppered throughout the county, with Bonham, the county seat, in its center.

It's refreshing to take a look at my home county through the eyes of a tourist. On this trip I'll play tour guide with family and friends, taking them to places I knew as a boy, exploring new places and reacquainting myself with a remarkable slice of North Texas.

Day one brings my wife, daughter Bailee, a friend and me to the Fannin County Museum of History. South of downtown in the restored 1900s-era

Texas and Pacific Railway depot, the expansive museum depicts many facets of local history. My daughter spies a bow made from bois d'arc wood that my brother crafted by hand and donated to the museum. Bois d'arc trees are an important part of the area's heritage — one of the first botanical records of the tree was made just about three miles from the museum.

As we peruse the many exhibits, Bailee and her friend wander into a back room exhibit about Jones Field. Complete with a restored Fairchild PT-19 training plane, the room recounts the World War II training base and honors those who

traveled and gained notoriety by playing in the Benny Goodman Orchestra, and he influenced guitar greats like B.B. King.

We head over to Willow Wild Cemetery and see the gravesite of one of the greatest modern political figures, Sam Rayburn. Rayburn was raised southeast of Bonham, near the town of Windom, but as an adult, he lived on a farm that sits west of Bonham along Texas Highway 56 and is operated by the Texas Historical Commission. It's hard to imagine the political gravity of a figure who served as a U.S. congressman for 48 continuous years and as speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

closing. Instead, we drive past to take a look. My kids have never toured the historic homestead, so we'll wait another day to see it. Right now, it's time for dinner with family.

On day two, my son and I drive southeast of Bonham in the dark. We are headed to the Ladonia Fossil Park, trying to arrive at first light before the heat and humidity set in. Right as the sun comes up, we pull into the parking area on the south side of the North Sulphur River. The river channel is expansive and straight.

In the 1930s, the river was channelized and rerouted north of its original path. The channel was dug 20 feet wide and 10 feet deep and



FEATURED ATTRACTIONS (LEFT - RIGHT):

- ★ James Bonham statue
- ★ Fannin County Museum of History
- ★ Texas Highway 34 bridge over the wide and muddy Sulphur River
- ★ Ironroot Republic Distillery

contributed to the war effort.

The museum inspires us to explore some local cemeteries to find the graves of two legendary Fannin County figures. At Gates Hill Cemetery, just a few blocks south of the museum, we find the grave of Charlie Christian. Christian (a 1990 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee) is considered to be a pioneering electric guitar performer and was born, and later interred, in Bonham. During his short lifetime, Christian

longer than any other. He was so well respected that at his funeral in 1961, Presidents John Kennedy, Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman and Vice President Lyndon Johnson came to Bonham to pay their respects.

Rayburn's funeral and legacy are well documented at the Sam Rayburn Library. Faced with white Georgia marble, the stately building overlooks a courtyard where a bronze statue of the speaker holds a copy of the Constitution in one hand and a gavel in another. It's a fitting tribute to a man who was involved in most every piece of key legislation in the first half of the 20th century.

Inside the building is a library that houses many old books about the area, an interactive chronicle of Rayburn's public service and a space that replicates his Washington, D.C., office. We spend so long taking in the displays that we don't make it to the Sam Rayburn House before

straightened to drain the surrounding farmland quicker, with mixed results. While the flooded river bottomlands were drained and the land made more arable, erosion took its toll — the river channel is now over 200 feet wide and 60 feet deep.

The silver lining of the erosion, however, is that new layers of fossils emerge every time a heavy rainfall scours the riverbed. While this summer's been dry, Ryan and I still walk the concrete steps to the riverbed below. For a few hours we walk east from the bridge and look for the slightest hint of something fossilized. His best find? A cow tooth. While not a relic of an ancient sea, he was proud of it. We did end up finding several oyster shells.

We leave the river and drive north on Texas Highway 34 and pass through the little community of Bug Tussle, home of the annual Bug Tussle Trek, where antique auto



MORE INFO:

BONHAM AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE:

(903) 583-4811,
www.fannincountytexas.com

FANNIN COUNTY MUSEUM OF HISTORY:

(903) 583-5947,
www.fannincountyhistory.org

SAM RAYBURN LIBRARY:

friendsofsamrayburn.com

CADDO NATIONAL GRASSLANDS:

(903) 905-2207

KUECKELHAN RANCH RODEO:

www.kueckelhanrodeo.com

enthusiasts base a countywide cruise each August.

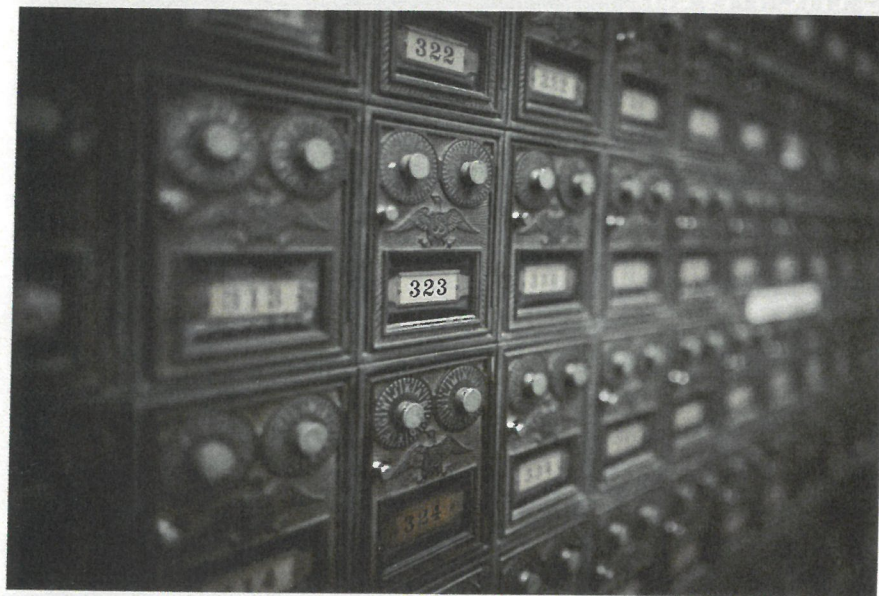
Summer to early fall months are blazing hot here, but, in a lot of ways, it's my favorite time of year. Passing through the black dirt farmlands when the crops are maturing is meditative. The rusty reds of milo, yellow sunflowers, white cotton and yellow corn and hay offer a magnificent palette of color for those who just like to cruise.

Ryan and I head to Honey Grove to look around its historic square a bit before we grab a snack, check out pioneer photographer Erwin Smith's grave and head up FM 100 toward the Caddo National Grasslands Bois d'Arc Unit. Along the drive, we see the land transition from flat blackland prairies to rolling oak savannah peppered with big stands of mature pines. In the 17,873-acre grasslands, the public can hike, bird watch, hunt by permit and enjoy the two lakes. In all, the county has five public access lakes, with two more slated for construction in the near future. If you love water and summer water activities, you have plenty of options.

While Ryan and I aren't equipped to paddle Lake Crockett, we do a



Above: A cowboy tries his best to hang on in the saddle bronc event at the annual Kueckelhan Ranch Rodeo just north of Bonham.
Left: The old general store sits abandoned in the little community of Bug Tussle.



little hiking in the woods, and I reminisce to him about hunting and camping in these woods when I was a boy. In every season, these woods tell a different story. Today, trumpet vine is in full bloom, and the late summer blooming plants like basket flower are starting to emerge.

We complete our road trip by driving over to Coffee Mill Lake, up to Telephone and over to Lake Fannin, then down through Ivanhoe and Lake Bonham before we end up back in Bonham just before dinner.

After a quick dinner of chicken fajitas at Rolando's, I meet up with lifelong friend Garry to attend the 61st annual Kueckelhan Ranch Rodeo. Established by the late Haynes Kueckelhan, the annual three-night rodeo, held just north of Bonham, is perhaps the longest running family-owned rodeo in the country. It's been a long time for me,

Above: A Farmall tractor is parked outside a store in downtown Honey Grove. Old post office boxes are on display at the Fannin County Museum of History.

and I'm happy to see that the locals still turn out in earnest. Garry and I arrive 15 minutes before the grand entry, and the stands are nearly full. Locals wear their best Western duds, try their hand at roping a dummy steer, ride a mechanical bull and take in the arena events.

At the end of our trip, we pack up the family and head west toward our adopted home. As I drive away, I have a new perspective and new respect for the people and places I call home. ★

Russell Graves is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Childress but spends a considerable amount of time at his cabin in rural Fannin County.



"REDFISHING AT ITS BEST"

LOCALS
LOVE
FALL
IN
Port A



"COASTAL CUISINE FEATURED DAILY"

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