

3 Days in the Field / By Tom Harvey

DESTINATION: WASHINGTON COUNTY

TRAVEL TIME FROM :

AUSTIN – 1.5 hours / BROWNSVILLE – 5.5 hours / DALLAS – 3.25 hours

HOUSTON – 1.25 hours / SAN ANTONIO – 2.25 hours / LUBBOCK – 6.5 hours / EL PASO – 9 hours



The Birthplace of Texas

Brenham, Barrington and the Bard are among Washington County's delights.

The winding road to Brenham ends with put-the-top-down, bucolic scenery — green, rolling farmland where wildflowers run riot in spring and cows graze contentedly. Just don't forget to enjoy the culture of the area as well, whether it's exploring the birthplace of Texas, indulging in first-class barbecue or a taking a seat in a barn to watch the immortal works of the Bard.

This is Brenham, home of Blue Bell ice cream and the Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site. From this delightful little city, radiating outward along country lanes, past the white fences of pastoral horse farms owned by Houston expatriates, are a dozen sister towns: Burton, Chappell Hill, Independence, Winedale, Round Top and others, each with unique charms.

We left Austin on a Thursday evening, feeling worn out by city life. In two hours, we were sliding back in time to a slower country pace. As evening shadowed the warmth of an August day, we wheeled our bags into the Ant Street Inn, a bed-and-breakfast in downtown Brenham.

Mile-high ceilings and red brick give this 1898 structure comfortable charm and a historical feel. The walls hold a hodgepodge of art, much of it focused on Texas history, along with American pioneer classics. A drawing of what appears to be John Smith marrying Pocahontas adorns the grand staircase that takes guests to 14 themed guest rooms on floor two.

The inn started life as a retail store for the mercantile business of Swiss immigrants Josef, Sigmund and Benedict Schmid. Suzy and Keith Hankins bought it in 2011, excited to continue the work of Pam and Tommy Traylor, who restored the Renaissance Revival-style building as a boutique hotel in the early 1990s. There's a lot of food and drink within easy walking distance of Ant Street. Brazos Valley Brewery is right around the corner on West First. Home Sweet Farm farmers market just down the street brings fresh-grown produce and artisan foods from area farms into town most weekdays.

The inn's fabulous back veranda sweeps the entire length

The sun sets on a pastoral scene in Independence.



PHOTO © ERIC W. FOHL



Clockwise from top left: Pies are the specialty at Royers Cafe in Round Top; Shakespeare at Winedale features the Bard in a barn; history comes to life at Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site's Independence Hall; The Prairie by Rachel Ashwell B&B is decorated in shabby chic style.



of the second story, overlooking a huge cottonwood in an inviting back garden with a trickling fountain. The morning we awoke there dawned misty, with low, foggy clouds draping the town and faraway trees showing gray through the white vapor.

We had determined to start our day at Washington-on-the-Brazos, a short drive north of Brenham. But first we sought a fortifying jolt of locally roasted Independence Coffee at the Must Be Heaven ice cream shop just one block away.

In 2003, Independence Coffee Co. owners Ragan and Christi Bond roasted their first 2,000 pounds.

"We gave away 1,800 pounds to friends and others willing to take the chance with a very 'green' product and company," Ragan said. "We drank the rest."

Today, Independence roasts more than 200,000 pounds a year, selling to big retailers like H-E-B and Whole Foods. The Bonds have some deliciously distinctive coffees, including Madalyn's Backyard Pecan, which boasts real pecan pieces and is named for their daughter, who used to gather pecans for this flavor.

A block from Must Be Heaven is the Washington County Visitor Center in the historical Simon Theater, the focus of a civic effort to fund a restored conference center and concert and film space. Here, visitors will find abundant maps and information for regional tourism.

We headed north to the birthplace of Texas. Three wonderful facilities bring history to life here: Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site, its associated Barrington Living History Farm and the Star of the Republic Museum, run by Blinn College. It was in Independence Hall that the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed.

We sauntered into the cool indoor visitors center and perused the exhibits and artifacts. While telling stories of the past, this site embraces modern interactive tools. A Web-based game called "In Washington Town" takes visitors to March 1836, where they play the role of young farm boy or girl, traveling to Washington town in search of his or her father, who is overdue from a supply trip.

The newer "Texas 1836" mobile phone app presents a virtual version of Washington. As you stroll the grounds pointing your smartphone, historical images and information emerge — you can even take a virtual photo standing next to Sam Houston. (Travel tip: Download the app at home; the park visitors center signal is fine for routine matters but too slow for big downloads.)

Sated with virtual history, we headed to the Barrington Living History Farm for the real deal. This fully functioning 19th century cotton farm centers on Barrington, the 1844 home of the last president of Texas, Anson Jones. The staff works the farm in full period dress, performing daily chores as if it

were 1850. Farm doings vary with the seasons, and the park hosts a series of special events focused on butchering, medicine, leatherwork, blacksmithing, gardening, hearth cooking and more.

We eventually ran into William Barrett Travis — the pig, that is, not the Alamo defender. The little 1-year-old Ossabaw Island hog had been born the previous July, and he was mighty skittish around strangers — no doubt why his breed has survived and stayed pure on their Georgia barrier island. After trying unsuccessfully to coax him out for a photo, we finally stopped bothering little Travis and moved on.

Our visit coincided with the annual Chappell Hill Lavender and Wine Fest, and we savored its varied bounties along country lanes, which even in August showcased fields of rolling green. For lunch we rolled into the town of Chappell Hill and bumped up the wooden porch into Bevers Kitchen, a classic down-home country dining establishment, where the folks are friendly and homemade pies call your name from a tall, glass-fronted cooler.

Early that evening, tired and a little wilted from the heat, we turned southwest toward Round Top and our chosen lodging for the night, The Prairie by Rachel Ashwell. This gorgeous green getaway boasts a bevy of cottages around an 1800s farmhouse.

Previous owner Lenore Prudhomme
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and her partner, Danny Reibel, painstakingly found, moved and restored the sprawling B&B's historical structures, formerly known as the Outpost at Cedar Creek. In the 2000s, Rachel Ashwell discovered the place on her recurring trips to the region's famed antique shows. When it came up for sale in 2010, she bought it and furnished all the rooms anew in her signature shabby chic style.

What is shabby chic, you ask? Imagine a snowstorm of white and pink curtains and bedspreads, along with distressed furniture and naturally rustic walls, floors and fixtures. In the Blue Bonnet Barn where we stayed, tall picture windows lined one wall of the front sitting room, where the golden light of morning came dappling in through lace curtains. The effect is romantic, nostalgic, captivating.

"My bed-and-breakfast is part aesthetic inspiration from Marie Antoinette, part authentic detail from *Coal Miner's Daughter* and part passion from *Gone with the Wind*," writes Ashwell in her 2011 coffee table book *Shabby Chic Inspirations*.

That night we had tickets to the

season finale of Shakespeare at Winedale, which turned out to be a rollicking rendition of *The Comedy of Errors*. For Texans who appreciate high culture in a down-home setting, this Lone Star original goes down sweet, like barbecue with champagne.

In 1970, University of Texas at Austin professor James B. "Doc" Ayres created a program, now housed in the English Department, to help students better understand Shakespeare by performing the plays. Each summer, 15 to 20 students spend 11 weeks living and breathing the Winedale experience, culminating in 24 performances during July and August.

The main performance space is a barn donated by Ima Hogg, who in 1965 created the Winedale Historical Complex in Round Top (southwest of Brenham) through a gift to the university. Today the 225-acre complex includes a 20-acre lake, historical houses and educational facilities, plus woods and pasture that provide the outdoor classroom for the Gideon Lincecum Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists.

The next day we lunched at Royers Cafe in Round Top, a regional

culinary sensation. Folks cram into the little café for delicious Southern fare, including another delectable selection of homemade pies, in case you didn't get enough over at Bevers. The little town around it affords a delightful tourist stroll, with wine and gift shops that blend the comfortably upscale with quaint and authentic Texana.

Alas, it was finally time to depart for home. Regrettably, we hadn't been able to squeeze in all of the outstanding nature tourism adventures around Brenham, including birding, fishing, boating, bicycling and more. Camping and outdoor fun opportunities abound at nearby Lake Somerville State Park and Trailway, which has two separate units on the lake's western and northern shores. Plus there's the private Big Creek Resort Marina and Campground, while the lake's southeast shore offers three Corps of Engineers-operated camping parks — Rocky Creek, Yegua Creek and Overlook. We didn't make it to the historic tourist towns of Independence or Burton, either.

Luckily, the great thing about discovering a wonderful place to visit is ... you can always come back. ★

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