

NOT JUST HORSIN' AROUND CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS ABOUND DOWNTOWN IN HISTORIC FORT WORTH

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Author: Innes, Clare

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WEEKEND PLANNER Clare Innes is a freelance writer who lives in Belmont.

FORT WORTH - They called the southern end of Fort Worth "Hell's Half Acre" in the early days of Texas statehood. In the 1870s, cattle drovers stopped at the stockyards in the north end of town to gear up for months on the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. On their way back, freshly cut pay filled their heads with visions of the bawdy south end of town: gambling, rambunctious sinnin', and enough whiskey to drown the memories of the hellish task of driving cattle.

While the Stockyards District now stands as a tribute to the rough and rowdy cowboy life (see article on page E6), Fort Worth's historic downtown has been burnished to a sheen, and world-class museums, concert halls, and gourmet restaurants with a distinctive Texas twang line the reconstructed streets.

In the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, enormous screens flash brief histories of 163 inductees. The roster of rodeo champions, ranchers, teachers, artists, and others includes Georgia O'Keeffe, Willa Cather, Sacagawea, and Patsy Montana.

"We would watch the skies constantly for rain," reads a quote in one history from Sandra Day O'Connor, who grew up on an isolated cattle ranch in Arizona. "Rain was our life's blood." Suddenly the difference between the first female US Supreme Court justice and the rest of us seems less stratospheric.

During a brief video biography of contemporary rancher Gretchen Sammis, a woman comments to her companions that she and Sammis started riding Shetland ponies at age 3. She turns out to be Sammis's younger sister, Joan Blumenshine, visiting from Denver. "We tried to do all kinds of crazy tricks on those horses," she recalls. The chaps her sister handed down to her are on display elsewhere in the museum.

Once a visitor recognizes the voices of active and retired cowgirls touring the museum, it's thrilling to eavesdrop on some of the living histories that never made it into the displays.

In the Cultural District, the Will Rogers Memorial Center hosts world-class competitions for cutting horses, paint horses, and other equestrian events. Year-round, it's often possible to drop in and see top-ranked horses and the occasional horse-minded celebrity.

At the Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art and the Amon Carter Museum, paintings and sculptures by Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell pull you right into a stagecoach robbery, a battle with Indians, or a cowboy's drunken revelry. Finely wrought descriptions accompany the works, such as this one describing the Russell painting "Wild Horse Hunters" at the Amon Carter Museum:

"A group of riders have cornered [a wild stallion] at the end of a dry gully. As the riders converge on the frightened horses, one has flung his lariat across the gully to rope the stallion. . . . The rider has wrapped his lariat around the saddle horn and deftly swings his weight off the saddle

to counterbalance the pull of the taut rope." Sure enough, the painting depicts all of that, but an eye unfamiliar with the ways of horses and cowboys would have missed much of the drama.

On a December visit, downtown Fort Worth is aglow at night, and Steve "Cowboy" Murrin, a.k.a. "Mayor of the Stockyards," is looking like a whip-thin, very Western Santa Claus. He is wearing stovepipe cowboy boots, blue jeans, a white shirt, and a tan barn jacket. His white beard fluffs out over a red bandana knotted around his neck. A burn the size of a bullet hole accents the brim of his white cowboy hat in the spot where a cinder from a campfire left its mark.

In the Sky Bar at the Reata Restaurant, Murrin neatly wraps a longneck in another one of his red bandanas as the city twinkles below.

"Every town has two beginnings: before and after the Civil War," he says. "Reconstruction was pretty ugly. Many of those who refused to make deals with the Yanks moved farther west. West Texans hated Yanks with a total, ignorant hatred. Banks in Dallas were tied to the East, and everything you did required a lawyer. In West Texas, banks were still run by Texans, and all you needed was a handshake."

Murrin's grandfather came to Fort Worth from Scotland and started a saloon in 1875. His father worked in the stockyards and later bought a ranch nearby.

Murrin grew up on the ranch, enthralled by his father's stories of the old days at the stockyards. He was dealing in real estate in the mid-1970s when he bought much of what is now the Stockyards District. He has been instrumental in rebuilding the district, turning it into a Mecca of West Texas heritage.

Later, at the Chisholm Club, Murrin can't keep a good thing to himself, sharing generous portions of tomato bisque with a hint of poblano pepper and roasted corn, and later swapping a tender cut of lamb for quail stuffed with chorizo. His old friend Grady Spears, award-winning chef and author of "A Cowboy in the Kitchen" (Ten Speed Press, 1999), owns the restaurant and has elevated traditional trail food to haute cuisine.

Down the street at the Flying Saucer Club, Murrin thinks for a minute about what it means to be a cowboy. His eyes hold a fresh sadness.

"Yesterday we buried one. His grandfather started a ranch in 1874. His father was a rancher. It's what he did all his life. I first met him at a friend's rodeo - different from a more formal rodeo. We had an event called sortin', ropin', and brandin'. You had to sort a steer out of the herd, rope 'im, then brand 'im with whitewash. He threw this wonderful loop, sort of over his shoulder, and caught that calf. It's an amazing skill to have a hand with a rope. He didn't brag or make a deal out of it. That loop just came out of who he was."

Murrin pauses, communing with his memories. A woman asks if he will pose with her friends at a nearby table. He happily obliges for what turn out to be visitors from Bosnia.

"I can't stand Western movies," confesses Elma Prcic of Sarajevo, who can't stop grinning. "But now I am here, I want to see cowboys. At home, everyone told us, please meet a cowboy. They wanted me to meet J. R., but I think it's more difficult," she says, referring to the character from the old longtime TV drama "Dallas."

Murrin tips his hat and heads back out to his ranch as a pair of bicycle cops cruise by, riding herd over a small stampede of SUVs and pickup trucks.

SIDEBAR: Fort Worth itinerary

Friday

6 p.m. Rest at Etta's Etta's Place B & B

200 W. 3d St.

817-654-0267

www.ettas-place.com

\$125-\$165

Settle in at a place named after the girlfriend of the Sundance Kid, who frequented the area with his Hole in the Wall Gang. Decorated with antiques and Texas heirloom reproductions.

7 p.m. Steak a claim Chisholm Club

222 Main St.

817-210-2222

www.gradyspears.com

\$16-\$35

Enjoy inventive haute cuisine with a Texas twang.

9 p.m. Shot sampler Reata Restaurant

310 Houston St.

817-336-1009

www.reata.net Try one of the 150 types of tequila at the outdoor bar.

Saturday

11 a.m. Got huevos?

Joe T. Garcia's

2201 N. Commerce

817-626-4356

www.joets.com

\$6-\$11

Abandon all hope of cleaning your plate when it's filled with Mexican-style eggs.

Noon You go, cowgirl National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame

1720 Gendy

800-476-FAME www.cowgirl.net

\$4-\$6

See the women who shaped and were shaped by the West.

2 p.m. How the West was drawn Amon Carter Museum

3501 Camp Bowie Blvd.

817-738-1933

www.cartermuseum.org Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art

309 Main St.

817-332-6554

www.sidrmuseum.org Free See paintings, sculptures, objects, and more by Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, and other Western artists.

4 p.m. Make it modern Kimbell Art Museum

3333 Camp Bowie Blvd.

817-654-1034

www.kimbellart.org Free See one of the world's outstanding modern public galleries.

7 p.m. Take out or dine in Esperanza's Bakery & Cafe

2212 North Main St.

817-626-5770

www.joets.com/esperanzas.htm

\$6-\$11

Dine with the locals on tamales, carnitas, and chicharrones.

9 p.m. Belly up Flying Saucer Club

111 E. 4th St.

817-336-7470

www.beerknurd.com Try one of the more than 80 beers on tap or 175 brews in bottles, and marvel at the 2,000 commemorative plates covering the walls of this friendly joint.

Sunday

11 a.m. Water, water everywhere Fort Worth Water Gardens Between Houston & Commerce at West Lancaster Before you leave, gaze in wonder at this geometric, 5.4-acre confluence of water and stone.