

Plains song Here, the land is austere, but the history is rich

By Glenn Frankel

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Like a schooner skimming a smooth, empty sea, our car is sailing north under a quilted sky of placid, fat-cheeked clouds. The naked sun is beating down, a hot breeze whips across the road like a hair dryer on max, and there's no sound except the occasional hoarse rumble of a passing truck.

We're in the Texas Panhandle on an early afternoon in late June; it's nearing 100 degrees and it'll be even hotter in a few weeks. This is the rooftop of Texas and the basement of the Great Plains, a vast, silent expanse of flat, arid land that is almost defiantly inhospitable to human activity. The painter Thomas Hart Benton once praised the region for making "human beings appear as the little bugs they really are. . . . The universe is stripped to dirt and air, to wind, dust, clouds and the white sun."

Sounds inviting, no? It's not hard to see why the Panhandle was one of the last parts of the continental United States to be settled by our pioneer ancestors and why, even today, our hold on the land seems tenuous. The weather is hot in summer and tempestuous in winter. The cuisine is by and large forgettable -- great Texas barbecue and Tex-Mex only really take hold 200 miles farther south. Route 66 is a shadow of its former glory, a sleazy black-sheep cousin to straight, respectable Interstate 40. Even Amarillo, celebrated in many a honky-tonk tune, looks deserted on a weekend afternoon, too much hat and not enough cattle.

So why is this trip really necessary? For me, it's because I'm working on a book about Comanches, the last great Native American warrior tribe that inhabited this area and fiercely protected it from outsiders for more than a century. But for you? Well, as it happens, the Panhandle is a bit deceptive. All that bad weather, relentless landscape and intimidating sky is a cover for a region that has seen some amazing moments of American history. The Panhandle doesn't always yield them up easily, but they're here and accessible, and they tell a multilayered story of continental America's last great frontier.

My wife and I started off in the town of Canyon at the [Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum](#), one of America's finest regional museums, which first opened its doors in 1933. The three-story building itself is a work of art -- a distinguished regional rendering of art-deco style. Inside, thousands of artifacts are on display, including replicas of the ranch houses and pioneer towns that started springing up here in the 1870s and the magnificent headdress of Comanche war chief Quanah Parker. There was also a temporary exhibit of the life of the legendary folksinger Woody Guthrie, who once lived in the northern Panhandle. But my own favorite was a short film on how to skin and butcher a buffalo.

Millions of the beasts once roamed the Panhandle, floating across the plains like vast schools of furry fish, and Comanches killed buffaloes with far more reverence than they showed for most human beings, giving thanks to the animal's spirit even while carving up its body. In the film, the hunter makes a quick slit along the underside to allow the insides to cool and minimize bloating,

then pulls out the stomach and intestines, which are later cleaned, stuffed with meat and roasted. The raw, steaming liver is eaten immediately, shared among the wives and children.

The 15-minute film is a bit like "The Silence of the Lambs": lots of deftly wielded sharp blades, raw meat and gore. The front shoulders are removed at the joint, into thin slices and spread along the grass or hung on poles to dry into jerky. The stomach lining is washed and used to carry water or hold food. The hide is staked out, dried and tanned for use as a tepee cover, clothing, robes and blankets. Even the mashed brains serve to soften and waterproof the hide. A young boy standing near me watched the film with his mouth agape and his eyes wide as saucers until his mother arrived to whisk him away.

The dead bison was the Comanche equivalent of Wal-Mart: all their shopping needs in one location. Thus when white hunters bent on exterminating the herds descended on the Panhandle with weapons of mass destruction like the long-range Sharps rifle, the tribe responded with violent alacrity. Which is why we decided to travel 109 miles to the northeast for our next stop, the spot where the warriors and the hunters staged a bloody showdown.

On the way, we stopped at the Panhandle's one required culinary showcase. The Big Texan Steak Ranch is just east of Amarillo on the north feeder road for I-40. Inside the lobby is an indoor amusement center -- pinball machines, a shooting gallery and dozens of families jamming the crowded gift shop, featuring jars of secret rattlesnake sauce and John Wayne lunchboxes, while they wait for their number to be called. Then we were ushered into the huge main dining room, where people eat at long tables. The main attraction was a small raised platform, center stage for those who have decided to take the [72-ounce steak challenge](#). Since the early 1960s, the Big Texan has offered this 4 1/2 -pound slab of beef free to anyone who can eat the entire thing -- along with shrimp cocktail, baked potato, dinner roll and salad -- in less than an hour. Our waitress told us that 50,000 people have tried, but only 8,000 have succeeded. In March 2008, [Joey "Jaws" Chestnut](#), then 24, polished off the whole meal in 8 minutes 52 seconds. But the ultimate record holder, according to the Big Texan's Web site, is a 500-pound Bengal tiger that downed the steak in less than 90 seconds (he ate outside).

Determined to beat the noontime heat, we set out early the next morning up State Highway 207 and made a right turn onto a one-lane dirt road. About a mile ahead a big barrier announced that the road was closed. There was no one in sight to ask about this except a pair of hawks floating in the shimmery distance. At this point, my inner Texan took over -- I simply drove around the barrier and we continued unimpeded. Fourteen miles later we reached the site of the [Battle of Adobe Walls](#). It was here in June 27, 1874, that several hundred Comanches, Kiowas and Cheyennes assaulted a trading post housing 28 men and one woman -- buffalo hunters and their support crew. An ambitious shaman named Isati -- which is Comanche for "Wolf's Rear End," according to local historians -- claimed that he had come up with bullet-proof medicine that would make the warriors invulnerable. He must have gotten the dosage wrong. When the Indians attacked at dawn, they were turned back by withering fire. Quanah Parker, who helped lead the attack, was shot in the shoulder and spent the rest of the morning sprawled in the bushes. At least 13 warriors died -- the defenders later displayed the heads of the Indian dead on spikes. Three of the defenders were killed.

This was in many ways the Southern Plains Indians' last hurrah. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan dispatched five columns of troops to hunt down and crush the remaining warriors in a campaign known as the Red River War. Adobe Walls is as solemn and silent as a graveyard. Only the outlines of six buildings, a few grave sites and two monuments remain. There are separate memorials to the Indians and the whites. The Indian one reads: "They Died For That Which Makes Life Worth Living -- Indians' Liberty, Freedom, Peace on the Plains Which They Enjoyed For Generations."

We moved on to tour the Hutchinson County Historical Museum in nearby Borger. It has a good set of Adobe Walls exhibits explaining the battle, plus a striking full-length portrait of Quanah, who became a figure of peace and reconciliation after he and his band surrendered a year after the battle. The museum is in the building that was once the Dilley Hotel, and they've reproduced the room where Thomas Hart Benton stayed in 1928 while painting the view outside his window. His "Boomtown" -- a copy of which hangs on the wall -- captures the bustling commerce and smoky pollution of the oil derricks that drove the economy of Borger and the Panhandle long after the last buffalo had ceased to graze.

Another exhibit recounts the life and times of A.P. "Ace" Borger, oilman, land developer and banker, who founded the town and gave it his name in 1926. After the Borger State Bank failed, the county's treasurer, Arthur Huey, walked up to Borger at the local post office and shot him five times with a Colt .45, then shot him four more times with Borger's own gun. Huey, rather amazingly, was acquitted by a jury of his peers of the 1934 slaying. Even then, bankers were not the most popular of folks.

We grabbed a hamburger down Main Street at Onion's cafe, then headed 30 miles east to the city of Pampa. The Woody Guthrie Folk Music Center is on South Cuyler Street in the old drugstore where Guthrie worked as a soda jerk for seven years while learning the guitar and churning out drawings, poems and some of the thousands of songs that redefined American folk music. Like Borger, Pampa was an oil boomtown. Guthrie came here from eastern Oklahoma with his family in 1929 at age 17. He married his first wife and had three children, but left them behind in 1936 to head west for California and lasting fame.

The Guthrie center has a small stage, a few display cases and a new proprietor, Pat Stewart, a retired mailman and music teacher who moved here recently from St. Louis. Like Guthrie, Pat's favorite instrument is the harmonica, and he organizes music lessons and events for local kids -- he's even co-founded a nonprofit educational group called [Harmonicas Across America](#) -- while carrying on Guthrie's memory and legacy. I bought a CD of "Mermaid Avenue," the Billy Bragg-Wilco collection of Guthrie songs, and Stewart threw in a cardboard cutout shaped like the folk artist's old guitar and bearing the slogan he wrote on it: "This machine kills fascists."

On the back wall of the Guthrie center is a selection of historic photos, including an iconic shot of downtown Pampa engulfed by a dark gray cloud on Black Sunday, April 14, 1935. The winds peaked at 60 mph in what was perhaps the worst storm of the Dust Bowl era. Five days later, the remnants of the cloud darkened the afternoon sky in Washington, prompting Congress to pass the first Soil Conservation Act, according to "The Worst Hard Time" by Timothy Egan.

We had one more stop to make -- back down to Canyon and then east to the Panhandle's supreme geological surprise: [Palo Duro Canyon](#), which Texans claim is the second largest in the United States, after its big brother, the Grand Canyon. Palo Duro (the name means "hard wood" in Spanish) is 120 miles long, 600 to 800 feet deep, and six to 20 miles wide. Hidden amid the flat monotony of the plains, we couldn't see it until we were virtually on top of it.

The canyon has three distinct layers: the flat plains on the rim, the flood plain and river valley at the bottom, and the sharp cliffs and rugged slopes of reddish-brown clay that connect the two. For a dry desert, it is full of grasses, trees and wildflowers: star thistles, sunflowers, widow's tears, cockleburs and prickly poppies; juniper, cottonwood, mesquite, saltbush, sumac and willows. There's also a virtual aviary of vultures, mockingbirds, woodpeckers, meadowlarks, wild turkeys and red-tailed hawks, not to mention rattlesnakes, turtles, horned lizards, bobcats and antelopes. In the winter, it's an ideal shelter for man and beast, in summer, a good jumping-off point for grazing on the adjacent plains.

The Comanches certainly thought so. Palo Duro was their winter stronghold, the place where they came to seek shelter and to hide from their enemies. It's where Quanah Parker and his dwindling band sought refuge after the failed Adobe Walls attack. But in September 1874, troops under Col. Ranald Mackenzie, a dour but skillful tactician, invaded the canyon and surprised Quanah's men. Most of them escaped, along with their women and children, but Mackenzie's soldiers captured nearly 1,500 horses and ponies. Mackenzie slaughtered most of the animals, effectively crippling his enemy. After a harsh winter roaming the Plains, Quanah, Isati and their band surrendered the following June.

Palo Duro is now a state park, and near the entrance is the Pioneer Amphitheater, with a stunning view of the red canyon walls, which blaze with rugged beauty when the sun begins to set. Each summer the nonprofit Texas Panhandle Heritage Foundation puts on a musical comedy-drama here called "[Texas!](#)" It has run for 43 years and is sold out most nights. The show celebrates the ranchers and homesteaders who settled here after the Indians were vanquished. The original songs are an exercise in shameless boosterism:

We expect you all to come to Texas!

If you're willing to be bold,

You can get it back tenfold -- in Texas!

We were there on the Fourth of July, and everyone in the packed house of 1,800 seemed to eat it up with wild applause and spirited cries of "Yeehaw!" This is history as written by the victors -- there's a brief scene in which a Comanche chief rides up on a horse. It's Quanah Parker asking the Texans whether the Indians and they can ever live together in peace. No problem, replies a young homesteader: "Both sides have suffered for this land and we both have lost loved ones. . . . Hate is not the way."

Sounds good, or maybe just glib, but it's only one man's version. The great thing about the Panhandle is that you can peel back history's myths, roam the arid vistas that forged them and come to your own conclusions.

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Details: North Texas panhandle

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GETTING THERE

The closest major airport to Amarillo is **Oklahoma City (!)** (263 miles east on Interstate 40). Southwest offers some nonstop flights from BWI starting at \$283 round trip. Continental, Delta, American, United, US Airways and Northwest offer one-stop flights from BWI, Reagan National and Dulles. Fares start at \$273 round trip.

WHERE TO STAY

The Panhandle has a wide array of motel chains centered in Amarillo. Some other choices:

Amarillo: Historic Parkview House, 1311 S. Jefferson St., 806-373-9464, <http://www.parkviewhousebb.com>. Bed and breakfast. Rates from \$85.

Borger: Three Falls Cove, 8125 FM 3395, Sanford; 806-878-2366, <http://www.threefallscove.com>. Near Lake Meredith National Park, 15 miles west of Borger. Rates from \$100.

Canyon: Hudspeth Inn, 1905 Fourth Ave., 800-655-9809, <http://www.hudspethinn.com>. Rates from \$90.

Pampa: Cottonwood Springs, 1600 N. Highway 70, 806-665-7126, <http://www.cottonwoodsprings.com>. Located 24 miles north of Pampa. Rates from \$85.

WHERE TO EAT

Amarillo: Big Texan Steak Ranch, 7701 I-40 East, 800-657-7177, <http://www.bigtexan.com>. The one and only. From an eight-ounce sirloin at \$16.25 to the 72-ounce monster for \$72 (or free, if you can eat it and the trimmings in under an hour).

Leal's Mexican Restaurant, I-40 at George Street, 806-359-5959. Good for Tex-Mex. Dinner for two, \$20 and up.

Borger: Onion's, 502 N. Main St., 806-273-8263. Hamburgers and chili from \$5.

Canyon: Feldman's Wrong Way Diner, 2100 N. Second Ave., 806-655-2700, <http://www.feldmansdiner.com>. Local color, friendly service. Dinner entrees from \$8.99.

Clarendon: Clarendon Steak House, 118 S. Kearney St., 806-874-0565. More local color, home cooking. Entrees from \$8.99.

WHAT TO DO

Amarillo: American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame and Museum, 2601 I-40 East, 806-376-5181, <http://www.aqhhalloffame.com>. Tribute to the Panhandle's most enduring form of transportation. Open Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday (summer only), noon to 5 p.m. Adults \$6.

Borger: Hutchinson County Historical Museum, 618 N. Main St., 806-273-0130, <http://www.hutchinsoncountymuseum.org>. Pick up the guide to the Adobe Walls battle site, 28 miles to the northeast. Open Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Donations accepted.

Canyon: Palo Duro Canyon State Park, 806-488-2227, <http://www.palodurocanyon.com>. Hiking, horseback riding, rock climbing and mountain biking in the former Comanche stronghold. \$5 per adult.

Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, 2503 Fourth Ave., 806-651-2244, <http://www.panhandleplains.org>. The grandest of American regional museums. Open Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and 1-6 p.m. Sundays, September through May. Adults \$10.

Pampa: Woody Guthrie Folk Music Center, 320 S. Cuyler St., <http://www.woodyguthriepampatx.com>. In the former drugstore where the great folk song artist worked for seven years. Days and hours are irregular. Donations accepted.

FOR MORE INFORMATION <http://www.thc.state.tx.us> <http://www.traveltex.com>

-- G.F.