

# 3 Days in the Field / By Mary O. Parker

DESTINATION: COTULLA

TRAVEL TIME FROM:

AUSTIN – 3 HOURS / BROWNSVILLE – 4.25 HOURS / DALLAS – 6 HOURS

HOUSTON – 4.75 HOURS / SAN ANTONIO – 1.5 HOURS / LUBBOCK – 8 HOURS / EL PASO – 10.5 HOURS

## Crazy for Cotulla

*A short drive from The Chap's solitude, Cotulla has a distinct Mexican flavor.*



The decorative entrance to The Chap indicates that your hosts here are a vast array of wildlife.

I've fallen in love with the South Texas Brush Country and find myself hungry for deeper exploration of the *brusada's* dusty rawness. Since a brief visit two years ago, I've wanted another nibble at this rustic part of old Texas.

What better way to begin than with a visit to Chaparral Wildlife Management Area? Affectionately known as "The Chap," this 15,200-acre WMA has plenty of room in which to roam. After a few short hikes, most notably one on the Arena Roja Trail, my husband Jeff and I reflect on the abundance of critters we see. Our favorites are the Merriam's pocket mice that play hide-and-

seek with us as we amble.

The Chap provides public hunting opportunities seven months of the year, but from April through August, it's open to the public for non-consumptive recreation. This evening it appears that we're the only ones taking advantage of this, which lends harmony to the glow of the stars and the yips and yaps of the coyotes. As the night settles over our campsite, I realize that the rawness I've come to explore has already lived up to my expectations.

The next day we drive 20 miles to Cotulla, back into civilization. We come first to the historic Front Street, the focus of a ren-



Clockwise from top left: A collection of deer antlers from The Chap; cowboy hats come with stories at the Texas Hat Museum; a display case of historic items at the front counter at T.R. Keck and Sons lumberyard.



aissance that's gaining momentum. Cotulla's rebirth is a work in progress and there's lots of hope here. This hope is embodied in Patsy Leigh, the Main Street Program coordinator and one of the town's most ardent cheerleaders. She's also destination number one. Since Cotulla is so non-touristy, she's going to help us with our itinerary.

She suggests a visit to the Brush Country Museum, where we're welcomed by literally hundreds of American snout butterflies fluttering about the lantana. From the outside the museum looks like a simple 1920s white frame house, but we soon find out how much meandering there is to do inside. Volunteer Nora Mae Tyler enriches the experience with her vivid stories. When finally we end our tour in a one-room schoolhouse, she tells us that not only was this the impetus for the whole museum, it's also where she went to fourth grade.

Next we're off to Ben's Western Wear, one of Cotulla's most renowned institutions. When we walk in, we're hit with the amiable scent of leather, and I watch as my husband is swept away by boot-shopping-with-Gramps memories.

Ben's is home to the Texas Hat Museum. Owner Jill Martin explains how her husband, Stewart, started it years ago as a way to

pay tribute to the men who wore the hats that hang on the walls. She shows me a poem written by Don Cadden that explains the whole concept. It includes the lines:

"When city slickers come through the door  
They can't believe their eyes  
These greasy, dirty, beat up hats  
Are displayed like a prize."

Well, I don't exactly consider myself a city slicker, but my eyes are amazed by one of the greasiest and dirtiest, the hat of a man called Carroll Adams. It looks as if it's been stomped on and peed on. and since Martin can't remember its story, I make up one of my own.

Meanwhile, I've lost Jeff to the book section. It's not big, but it's impressive, especially if you like Texana or anything at all to do with Texas. Jeff buys *El Lobo and Spanish Gold: A Texas Maverick in Mexico* by C.E. (Rick) Ricketts, but I'm so enamored with the hats that I don't discover his purchase until later that evening when we're back at the lodge.

Martin tells us about the beehive that keeps popping up in the crawlspace between the first and second floors. "When it gets to be 100 degrees, the honeycomb starts melting," she

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tells us, "and honey starts dripping from the ceiling." She points to a spot on the floor and says, "We could put a bowl right there and it would fill up with honey." There's none today because she recently had the hive removed, but she shrugs as she tells us she figures it'll be back. It always is.

We continue our exploration, finding the famous Welhausen School where Lyndon B. Johnson taught Mexican-American students for a year in 1928. It's a pretty brick building but, honestly, I'm more intrigued by the *tienda* located across the plaza.

This market, called Botanica Vasquez #2 & Grocery, is one of the most happening places we've seen in this town of 4,000. Folks come and go at a steady pace, while others sit visiting on the benches in front. Since this place is so reminiscent of the small Mexican towns I love, I ask if they sell tacos. I'm told no, but that if I want really good tacos I need to go to the stand just outside of Mike's Drive-Thru.

It turns out the taco stand actually has a name of its own, Guy & Wayas. Tonight it's manned by a friendly guy named Manzi, who's completely unconcerned by the heat as he stands over a smoker making brisket for the tacos. We're starved so we each order two. Manzi's sweaty work has paid off and they turn out to be as satisfying as our under-the-stars meal at The Chap was the night before.

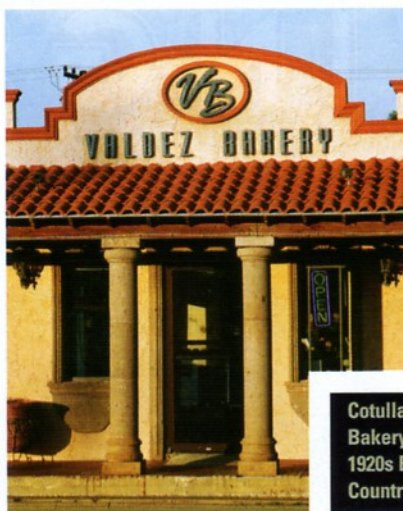
Tonight it's a real bed at the Talbert L Bar Lodge. Brenda Talbert designed the handsomely decorated two-story lodge for groups of hunters, since this is pretty much the deer-hunting capital of Texas, but couples can also stay in the off-season. When her son Murrey opens the door to the vast space we'll be calling home, I quip, "I don't think this will be big enough for the two of us." It's a unique luxury to have that much room to ourselves, and we have fun trying out all the different places to sit and read.

In the morning we're off to Valdez Bakery, which is a bit like the *panaderías* you find throughout Mexico, though certainly not as large. It's got conchas, one of my favorite types of Mexican sweet bread (*pan dulce*), but no place to sit, so we drive around listening to Tejano music (at Jeff's insistence) and search for a spot to munch on our goodies.

We decide to eat our pan dulce at, of all places, the Cotulla Cemetery. At the museum the day before, Tyler told us the story of Sheriff Charles B. McKinney, who was assassinated in 1886 "in the protection of outraged female innocence," and I want to find his gravesite. The story goes that two bad guys set him up with news that a young lady had been assaulted. So, off rode the sheriff (who, according to his gravestone was "without guile, truthful and true, kind and considerate and gentle" and the "bravest of the brave") to administer justice.

The cemetery isn't officially divided into two sections, but you can tell by looking at it that it is. And, just as the Hispanic part of town beckoned me the night before, so too does the Hispanic part of the cemetery because of its, well, aliveness. Borrowing from the traditions of old Mexico, sodas, water bottles and keepsakes have been left for loved ones in case they become thirsty or lonely in their travels.

Later, over a tasty lunch at Uncle Moe's Country Kitchen,



Cotulla's Valdez Bakery (left) and 1920s Brush Country Museum.

where they serve both Tex-Mex and barbecue (in other words, it's an authentic South Texas restaurant), we are met by Leigh again and she introduces us to John Keck. He's the owner of T.R. Keck and Sons, a lumberyard that's been in the family since it was established in 1893.

To say that Keck's store is simply a lumberyard is like saying it's hot here in July. In the spirit of Cotulla, there's a plethora of details hidden throughout, and the more we wander, the more we notice. From the ubiquitous Brush Country mounted deer heads to the old metal hardware bins to the many-gear old rope cutter, it's an adventure. It begins with the huge set of elk antlers that have hung by the door since the 1920s, when a customer left them as collateral until he could return from "up north" and pay his bill. Keck is still waiting.

While we're there, the manager shows us the old Cotulla Post Office sign from 1928 that he'd just found deep in the lumber bins. Keck says that these sorts of discoveries happen all the time, so they've created a kind of a mini-museum near the front counter. Among the items that catch my eye are old coffin nails that were found in the room where the coffin inventory used to be housed.

The time has come to say goodbye to Cotulla and the special beauty of the Brush Country. I silently send some extra hope out to Leigh for good measure. To The Chap I send gratitude for its satiation of my appetite for a quiet night in the brush. This tough little town and its vicinity are an acquired taste, and as I take one last glimpse in the rearview mirror, I realize it's one I've fully embraced. ★

#### DETAILS

- Chaparral Wildlife Management Area; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/hunt/wma/find\\_a\\_wma/?id=45](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/hunt/wma/find_a_wma/?id=45), 830-676-3413
- Cotulla Chamber of Commerce; [www.cotulla-chamber.com](http://www.cotulla-chamber.com), 800-256-2326
- Talbert L Bar Lodge; [www.talbertlbarranch.com](http://www.talbertlbarranch.com), 830-879-5585
- Ben's Western Wear; [www.benswesternwear.com](http://www.benswesternwear.com), 830-879-3500
- Brush Country Museum; [historicdistrict.com/museum/museum.htm](http://historicdistrict.com/museum/museum.htm)
- Botanica Vasquez #2 & Grocery; 830-879-9981
- Uncle Moe's Country Kitchen; 830-879-9981
- T.R. Keck and Sons; 830-879-2365
- Valdez Bakery; 830-879-3450