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# Good Life

SPRING 2019 • VOL. 1, ISSUE 2 **WOOD LIFE**

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Spring 2019

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# A LEGACY OF COUNTRY MUSIC

by Larry Tucker

## Wood County home to pioneers in the industry

**W**ood County's history abounds with music. Long before Mineola's and Golden's talented Kasey Musgraves walked away from this year's music industry awards with four Grammys, Wood County has been an incubator for country music.

You can trace back almost a century ago when a five-piece music ensemble known as the East Texas Serenaders formed in 1927 as a forerunner of what was to become Western Swing.

The Serenaders lineup consisted of men from the Mineola and Lindale area. The front man was Daniel Huggins Williams on the fiddle, and he was joined by fellow Lindale musician and guitar player Cloet Hamman. On the tenor banjo was John Munnerlyn, and on the three string cello Henry Bogan, both of whom hailed from the Mineola area. Banjo players Shorty Lester and his brother Henry were added to the group on some recordings. The Lesters were said to be from the Garden Valley area.

Munnerlyn worked for the United Gas Pipeline Company west of Mineola while Bogan worked at the Mineola Post Office. Bogan started out playing the piano and then went to the cello. A cello normally has four strings, but Bogan took one off. "I only need three strings, don't need four," he remarked.

It was the late Artie Tucker, also from Mineola, who said: "When you lived in the country, sometimes you could hear the music. That's when you knew the East Texas Serenaders were nearby. They would pull up and unload, sometimes using a wagon for a stage."

The group turned down many opportunities to travel throughout the United States; their full-time jobs kept them close to home. However, their popularity did take them to Dallas, Houston and into Oklahoma. They played at large hotels like the Baker and the Adolphus in Dallas for a fee of \$8 to \$15 per night.



The Serenaders recorded in Dallas for Columbia Records, and then in 1928 they recorded 14 more for Brunswick Records. The Serenaders set the stage for other western and Texas bands, playing their ragtime and Tin Pan Alley style. From listening to the radio, they picked up influences from Chicago jazz, Cajun sounds and the newer swing styles of popular music.

According to the Texas State Historical Association, when Bob Wills was asked about his success, he said the only early competition he had was the East Texas Serenaders. Wills and his Playboys took up where the Serenaders left off, and the rest is western swing history.

The Serenaders recorded songs like East Texas Drag, Arizona Stomp, Shannon Waltz, Combination Rag and Mineola Rag. Their music can be heard today on Document Records "The East Texas Serenaders: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, 1927-1937."



Beginning in the late 1930s and into the next decade, a blind Alba teenager rose to become one of the top talents in the post-World War II era. Leon Payne was born blind in 1917. Until he was 18 years old, Payne lived and attended the Texas School for the Blind in Austin.

While at the school, his teachers encouraged his musical interest as a way for him to support himself. Payne became proficient at playing the guitar, piano, organ, drums and trombone. He started playing with bands in the mid-1930s, and his songs were aired on the radio.

*(continued on page 6)...*

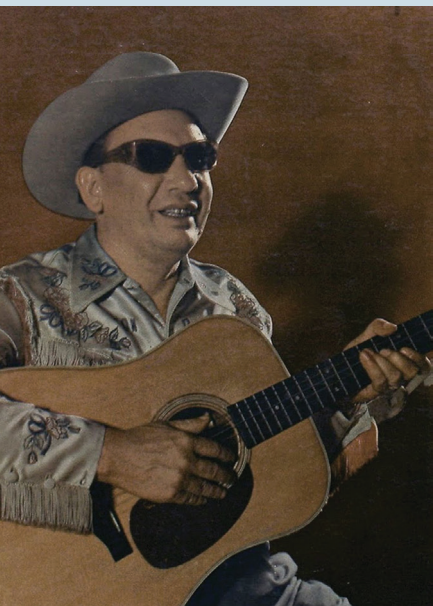


# COUNTRY MUSIC LEGACY

(continued from page 5)...



LEON PAYNE



Payne would go on to join Bob Wills' Texas Playboys in 1938 and remained affiliated with them most of his career. At about the same time in the late 1920s, Payne began writing the first of hundreds of songs he would pen.

Payne formed his own band, The Lone Star Buddies, in 1949. This group went on to do guest appearances at The Grand Ole Opry, Louisiana Hayride and Bog D Jamboree in Dallas.

In 1939, Payne recorded his first solo recording. He's probably known best for his hits I Love You Because and You've Still Got a Place in My Heart. Hank Williams recorded Payne's Lost Highway, and it became a big hit. Williams thanked Payne by gifting him his 1938 Martin D18 guitar.

Payne's 1950 version of I Love You Because, written for his wife Myrtie, became his biggest hit. Leon Russell covered the song on his 1973 album Hank Wilson's Back. In 1969 at the

age of 52, Payne died of cancer. His I Love You Because was performed at Myrtie's funeral in 2008 by several of Payne's musician friends.

There's a beautiful collection about Payne located at the Alba Public Library and Museum on the square in downtown Alba.

One of those musicians Payne played with and mentioned, Jack Rhodes, became a prolific songwriter in his own right. Payne and Rhodes were step-brothers.

After Rhodes broke his back, he started writing songs while he was bedridden to keep from being bored. He was a country music producer and wrote many songs performed by rockers like Gene Vincent. He is recognized for his groundbreaking rockabilly songs. He is revered as an influential mentor for many up-start artists of the 1950s.

BMI recognized Rhodes for one million broadcasts of his song Silver Threads and Golden Needles, made popular in the rock world by Linda Ronstadt. He was inducted posthumously into the Nashville Songwriter's Hall of Fame in 1972 and the Rockabilly Hall Of Fame in 2009.

Rhodes at one time owned a café in Grand Saline as well as Trail 89 Motor Court and restaurant in Mineola. He died of a heart attack in 1968.

Winston Henry "Hank" Riddle was born in 1944 and grew up in the Hainesville area. Riddle was an adventurer, songwriter and screenwriter. Riddle graduated from Mineola High School in the early 1960s and went to North Texas State University in Denton (now UNT).

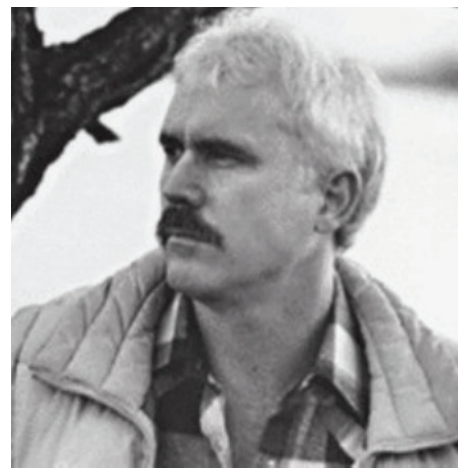
He moved to Nashville, where he got a job as a songwriter for King Coal Music, working with Loretta Lynn and her songwriting team. Riddle had a No. 1 country hit in 1986 with the recording of Until I Met You. The song was recorded by Judy Rodman on MTM records. It would be Riddle's, Rodman's and MTM Records' only No. 1 song.

Riddle was an avid outdoorsman and wrote a concept piece called The Good Forest, which has yet to be released. He was a historian and co-wrote a screen play with Bob Campbell about Columbus Joiner and the Texas oil boom in Kilgore. Riddle was known to use the term "Omit unnecessary words" when explaining writing songs.

In June of 2003, Riddle took his own life with a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He is buried in Concord Cemetery. On his tombstone, the words from one of his songs, Gone Home, reads "Hallelujah Gone Home, Gone Home, He's gone home, a precious one from us has flown, but Hallelujah, He's Gone Home."

Live music and talent is alive and well in Wood County. The Raphael Espinoza School of Music is located in Mineola. Teacher and mentor John Defore, who has taught the likes of Musgraves, Miranda Lambert, Casey Rivers and Michelle Shocked, is still making music and mentoring young protégés. The Bowery is a music venue in Winnsboro, which brings performers from local to national and world talent pools.

The history and trail of music dates back many years in Wood County. We can only look forward to what the future holds.



HANK RIDDLE

photo by Denise Barton





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# Marathon of Dreams

## Quitman runner set to race in Boston Marathon

by Zak Wellerman

For some, chasing a dream is often considered an impossible feat. But with work ethic, determination and extensive training, Quitman gym owner and runner Jessica Smith was able to achieve her goal of qualifying to run in the Boston Marathon.

"It's always been a dream," said Smith. Still, she had doubts whether she would ever achieve that dream, let alone at age 42. "I just never thought I would be fast enough to do that."

For the Rock Solid Gym co-owner, a lot of training went into being one of the few to qualify as a marathon runner. Smith is normally out running by 5 a.m., doing different running techniques in preparation for the various marathon terrains.

"I have easy runs" with a slower pace that allows her body to recover. "This morning I had some speed work so I did three-quarter mile repeats at a specific speed. I have long runs that are anywhere from 12 to 20 miles," she said. "One day is a long run typically done on the weekend. Speed work is one day."

She also sets aside time to run up and down hills. "It sounds silly but when you're going to run a hilly race it helps prepare your muscles for that," she explained.

To be a Boston Marathon qualifier, you have to reach a qualifying time at a race sanctioned by the Boston Athletic Association. Times are dependent on the runner's age and gender group.

Smith had been trying to get to Bos-

ton for a few years before qualifying at the California International Marathon in 2017 and the Light at the End of the Tunnel Marathon in Washington in 2018.

"So after two failed attempts, I hired a coach, and nine weeks before that marathon I fired him and hired another one," Smith said. "I was able to qualify, but we knew I hadn't reached my full potential yet because my other coach wasn't so good."

Winning is not the goal Smith wants to accomplish. "For me, it's to finish and to finish strong – definitely not winning," she said.

Her main goal in Boston is to take in the sights and scenery while enjoying every mile of the marathon.

"Typically when I'm at the race to set a ... personal record, or to place in my age group I don't pay much attention to what's going on around me," she said. "I don't look at the scenery. So that's why Boston is going to be different for me."

As a part of taking in the experience, Smith says Boston will likely be one of her slower races.

"I don't have a time goal for this one. It's probably going to be one of my slower, not my slowest, but one of my slower runs just because I just want to be able to enjoy it without really worrying about time or finishing fast," she said. "There's the Citgo sign and all these little landmarks, and I don't want to miss those."

Along with gaining stamina and



Smith runs to the finish line of the 2018 Light at the End of the Tunnel Marathon in Washington, one of the marathons that qualified her to run in Boston.

*Photo courtesy of Jessica Smith*

strength in her legs, Smith found that her mental health improved drastically because of running.

"There was a period of time in my life where I was on three different medications to deal with severe depression and PTSD, and there were days that I couldn't leave the house because of the PTSD," Smith said. "Running helped me get my life back. It helped bring me out of that. Running has completely changed my life. I am stronger and more confident. I'm not scared anymore. I've learned that it's OK to go after my dreams."

After Boston she has more fitness

*(continued on page 11)...*



# Strings Attached

## ***Hawkins Luthier Makes a Living Selling and Fixing Guitars***

"I'm in Hawkins, Texas, the most unlikely place in the world for a music store."

Kelly Barber, proprietor of Action Sound, was on a telephone call that had interrupted an interview. Barber took the call in his easy-going nature, without his hands stopping from the repair of an acoustic guitar on his bench.

The caller disclosed a problem with hairline fractures in his guitar.

"It's called weather-checking...the guitar expands and contracts at different rates...cooling and heating, heating and cooling...but I'd have to look at it. That's called checking," Barber replied.

Barber speaks to the caller as in a long, connected series of phrases, with an occasional period and a lot of commas. Part factual, part storytelling, and part philosophy. At the end of the call, which touched on a half dozen or so themes

– all based on guitar repair – he placed down the phone and returned to the discussion of his business as a luthier.

"I have a mechanical mind," he continued. "Guitars are a lot more mechanical than you may think. You have strings attached to a neck ... all under tension. You have to learn how to get them to intonate properly. They have to float at the string tension. I understand that. They tend to open up and play better after they have been played for a while."

Action Sound at 157 North Beulah in Hawkins is primarily a guitar repair shop but also a dealer for guitars and drums. It is also a guitar manufacturing center housed in a state-of-the-art wood shop around the block from the store. Finally, it is a repository of guitars and musical equipment spread over three separate warehouses.

Four full-time luthiers are employed under Barber's direction. "We still can't keep up," he admitted. "Look at this place, it's like a bomb of guitars went off in here."

Action Sound is located in the center building of what old-time residents would remember as Minshew's Grocery. The shop is strewn throughout with guitars of every type and state of disrepair. Many of them are in Barber's repair queue.

"I was born right here in Hawkins – born and raised," Barber said as he began to detail the path that brought him full circle in life. His grandfather, Joseph Simon "Red" Allaire, was one of the first oilmen of East Texas. He was among the very first employees of Humble Oil, the predecessor of Exxon, and was given his marching orders to "punch all the holes around Hawkins." Four generations of the family have since been oilmen, including Barber.

"I spent 20 plus years in the oilfield, but I loved music," Barber explained. He would spend his days in the oilfield and his nights repairing friends' guitars on his living room floor. Eventually, he admitted, he had to embark on the luthier path as he was the only one in East Texas.

The first Action Sound was opened just down the road at  
***(continued on page 14)...***





# Lake Fork to host prestigious Bassmaster Texas Fest

By Zak Wellerman

Lake Fork is known as one of the top spots for big bass fishing and it serves as the host of many fishing tournaments. This year, the world-famous lake is hosting the top-tier, four-day Toyota Bassmaster Texas Fest in May.

The event is scheduled May 2-6 as one of nine regular season tournaments in this year's Bassmaster Elite Series. The Sabine River Authority lakeside complex will be used as the event headquarters.

Lake Fork Chamber of Commerce, Wood County Industrial Commission and Emory Tourism are hosts for Texas Fest. Lake Fork Chamber of Commerce President Michael Rogge said the magnitude of a Bassmaster tournament is huge for Lake Fork.

"This is the first time that Lake Fork has been asked to host a premiere-level tournament by a major association such as Bassmaster," Rogge said. "They only hold eight Elite-level tourneys per year, and they have included Lake Fork for 2019. That's important for us."

A Toyota Tundra pickup truck will be awarded to the angler who reels in the heaviest catch. Top-

ranked professional anglers participating in the tournament will be paid \$1 million.

"Let's face it, the dollars that Lake Fork generates through tourism positively affects every community and town in Hopkins, Rains and Wood counties, which border the lake," Rogge added. "Our goal in planning the Texas Fest is to get all the communities to participate in this first-of-its-kind event. It's expected to draw between 5,000 and 8,000 people. It will promote the fishing industry, the anglers, the lake and the points of interest that surround it."

The tournament portion will be held May 2-3, while May 4 will feature vendors from area communities, food, music, and fun activities for all ages. Cities, chambers of commerce, and economic development entities will have booths to promote the towns in Wood County.

There will also be a 5K race titled "Dam Run" across the spillway as well as a Bassmaster-sponsored National High School Fishing Contest at Lake Quitman for the top 12 teams across the country.

For more about the Bassmasters tournament, contact Lake Fork Chamber at [info@lakeforkchamber.org](mailto:info@lakeforkchamber.org), Wood County Industrial Commission Executive Director Kiki Bettis at [woodcountytexas.com](http://woodcountytexas.com) or 903-768-2402, or Emory Tourism at 903-474-3022.



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# Marathon

...(continued from page 8)

aspirations to achieve, including a time goal, trail racing and ultra marathons.

Trail racing consists of camping at state parks and then running 20 miles. Ultra marathons are about going well beyond the 26.2 miles of a regular marathon.

## Runner Beginnings

Smith returned to her passion of running and fitness about 10 years ago. The Canton High School graduate has been a Quitman resident for 16 years.

"I was a runner in high school, but I didn't start running consistently until I turned 31," she said. "I was still carrying some baby weight even though my babies weren't little anymore. So

I decided to start working out and making a change."

She continued her journey by entering the annual Dogwood Pageant Drama Queen 5K in Quitman. People started contacting her to get advice on how to be healthier, which led to becoming a fitness instructor and eventually a gym owner.

"One thing led to another. I ended up becoming a group fitness instructor, and for a while I was in the First Baptist Church and then I was in the karate studio for a little while and eventually I had a little studio downtown and I had that for several years," Smith said.

She and her friend Brook Rogers decided to partner to purchase the gym, which was called Power Quest at the time. They've owned the gym for three years.

She has also participated in the Fresh 15 race in Tyler for the past several years and local 10Ks and half-marathons. Rock Solid Fitness hosts a two- and four-mile Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving.

The 123rd Boston Marathon will be held on Monday, April 15. Although



Jessica Smith wears her Boston Marathon uniform at Rock Solid Fitness, a Quitman gym she co-owns with Brook Rogers.

Photo by Zak Wellerman

80 percent of the approximately 30,000 runners are comprised of athletes who meet the qualifying standards, the remaining 20 percent consist of invitational entrants, including charity programs. Last year, participants who ran on behalf of more than 260 non-profit organizations raised more than \$36 million for charity.



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Christmas Bazaar .....	1st Saturday in December

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# Mineola's Greer Hill beckons mountain bikers to its forested trails by Hank Murphy

For people who savor the test of a good bike trail, Wood County has it covered. Greer Hill trails, tucked beneath the forest canopy at the east end of Mineola's Nature Preserve, offers respite from the broiling summer sun and the swampy proclivities of spring.

With a trail network of about three miles, Greer Hill is a relative newcomer to East Texas' mountain bike network. Only an ideation in 2015, Greer Hill staged a coming out party in January. Roughly five dozen hardcore mountain

bikers braved nippy temperatures and validated Greer Hill as a worthy venue during the E150 event sponsored by Elite Bicycles.

The course is expected to host another large event July 20 and 21 – the Mineola Midnight Madness run, which will begin at 6 p.m. and conclude at 6 a.m. That event will likely incorporate nearby equestrian trails and perhaps some railway bed to form a nine- to 10-mile loop through the Nature Preserve, according to Lynette Wood, president of East Texas Trail Advocacy, a chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association.

Wood, whose organization was instrumental in establishing Greer Hill, described the trails as single-track and purpose-built for mountain bicycling. The trails are a bit wider than others with places to pass. They are not terribly steep and are amenable to the novice rider while still offering plenty of thrills.

The trail system has features known as "rollers," which are humps along downhill portions of trail.

"It's like riding a rollercoaster on your bicycle," says Wood, who notes that the trails at Greer Hill have an enjoyable flow as riders descend the side of a ravine.

"It's pretty fun, the kids love it," Joyce Williams of Mineola, a key player behind the project, says of the course.

The first section of trail – the A trail – was designed by professional trail consultant Jake Carsten of Dirt Dojo in Austin. Last year, S&S Trails of Austin constructed trails D and E. The various trails offer relatively flat stretches for beginners and more challenging portions for advanced riders. Two more sections of trail – which would give the course about five miles – are in the planning stages.

Williams believes that one of Greer Hill's most endearing qualities is its ability to stay open during rainy weather.

"The defining feature is that we are open when other bike trails are closed," she says. "Because of our location, we are not under water when trails in Tyler are closed for a week or more."

Wood agreed that Greer Hill, which is built on higher ground, has managed to withstand the recent spate of rainy weather far better than courses in Tyler and Dallas. The trails, she said, were designed with drainage in mind.

Greer Hill also has another attribute popular to mountain bikers, notes Williams.

"Just about all of it is in the woods; that's how mountain bikers like. It's a little cooler in the summertime," she explains. The trails are managed to maintain a lush forest canopy, according to Williams.

Greer Hill was conceived in 2015 by Lake Country Trails, a local mountain

*(continued on page 17)...*



*Above, Cyclists pedal down a forested trail during the summer.*

*Below, Riders compete in the E150 in January at Greer Hill.*







*Kelly Barber works to repair a guitar at his shop in Hawkins.*

## StringsAttached

*...(continued from page 9)*

Liberty City. In 2009 and desiring a fresh start, he relocated to his hometown. “People thought I was crazy,” Barber recalls, “but we’ve been here since 2009 and just bought the two adjacent buildings.”

Along the way there were several bands and a music studio he built in his home. A drummer by trade, Barber hasn’t performed in over five years; his focus now is entirely on his enterprise. He explained that the East Texas music scene is not as big as it once was, but there are a lot more players. He described the acoustic guitar scene as much bigger.

“Today everyone wants acoustic and my shop is full of them.”

As a vender for Bedell Guitars, Barber lauds the instruments as “the most consistent sounding guitars in the world.”

He proudly identifies renowned guitarists who frequent his shop. Names such as Doyle Dykes, one of the leading acoustic guitarists in the world, who drops in about once a month.

After a long discussion of the challenges and joys of life, Barber paused and summarized: “I love music – I love musicians. And I love people who are talented enough to make music.”

So if you share those affinities, find yourself in East Texas, and desire to have a chat, drop on by. Just don’t be in a rush. As a parting thought, Barber shared: “And remember, don’t throw it away, we can fix it!”

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- MULTI-USE COURTS  
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- PRIVATE LAKES
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## Land for SALE!





# THE BEAUTY OF FALL FARM

## *Family property becomes relaxing country inn*

“God’s gotcha!” exclaimed Fall Farm’s proprietor Carol Fall, as she told the story of the origins of the inn. The family expression conveys the mysterious nature of events whose reasons for happening are later revealed.

If ever a country inn had its origins in an impromptu vision, it is the Fall Farm Country Inn. In 1987, Michael Fall accompanied his future wife, Carol Patrick, to visit Carol’s parents. At the time, her father, a local builder, was finishing the foundation for a new family home. Michael Fall fell in love with the site, the plan, and Carol. He purchased the building site and the surrounding 10 acres.

Michael and Carol married, and as they worked over several years finishing and furnishing the home, the original vision of running it as a bed and breakfast was ever present.

They amended the design numerous times to create a truly unique property – a country inn with their living quarters attached.

The end result today is a one-of-a-kind property: the Fall Farm Country Inn – a spacious, comfortable, and beautiful two-story home with three suites and one single accommodation. Proprietor Carol Fall has reopened the inn after renovations. Although Michael passed away in November, Carol is proud to explain how the inn reflects Michael’s passion for home building and home renovations.

“We wanted the home to be a destination all to itself,” she stated.

Fall Farm is situated on the south side of Farm Road 779, 3.5 miles east of the U.S. 69 and Farm Road 779 intersection. The inn sits atop a picturesque hill surrounded by acres of cleared land with mature hardwoods.

The site had been purchased in 1945 by Carol’s grandfather, Willie Carroll. He and his wife, Ora Patrick or “Gran” as she was known by the family, ran a 100-acre farm. Peanuts, cotton, watermelon, sweet

*(continued  
on page 16)...*



**Carol Fall**, proprietor of Fall Farms Inn in Wood County







Beautiful grounds, a hilltop gazebo, and a pool round out the landscape. Soon to be commissioned is a massage room. The nearby outbuilding, which had been purposely redesigned as Michael's construction company offices, is being transformed into a retreat center. The facility should be available in the spring for groups of about 20 people.

Carol's father, Gary Patrick, is still active in making improvements at the farm.

"He is still very much a part of the place," Carol fondly offered. Just as her 10 grandchildren are when they visit. As is clear from a brief conversation, it's as though Fall Farm guests become a part of a larger family once they take respite here.

Fall Farm gives travelers to Wood County fresh air and good conversation in a supportive and comforting setting. It is a destination all to itself.

The Fall Farm facilities may be viewed at Airbnb. Carol Fall may be contacted at 903-714-1595 or through [www.fallfarmcountryinn.com](http://www.fallfarmcountryinn.com).

# FALL FARM

*...(continued from page 15)*

potatoes and ribbon cane were among the crops grown at "the farm."

A native of Quitman who was raised in the Jacksonville area, Carol fondly remembers her visits to the family homestead at the farm. Thus, Fall Farm became literally a third generation family endeavor. The sense of family history is present in much of Carol's conversation. An experienced innkeeper with a kind soul and calm nature, it is apparent that Carol is a natural at caregiving.

The atmosphere at Fall Farm is one of total relaxation. The inn is beautifully decorated and welcoming. There is no sense of clutter or museum-like precautions necessary when moving about. Each room beckons and seems to whisper "Sit down, relax."

The inn has some wonderful surprises, like the back bar saved from the historic 1888 Building in downtown Mineola, and the new 16-place dining table that replaced the previous café dining area. Each accommodation harbors unique features as well. The loft in the Patrick Suite or an attached balcony may await you.





# Happy Trails

...(continued from page 13)

biking group. With the help of Wood and East Texas Trail Advocacy, the concept took flight with a \$10,000 grant from Union Pacific and \$3,000 from the Wood County Industrial Commission. The City of Mineola helped the project along with use of its forestry chipper, and its public works department cleared a trail section. The trail system also benefited from Texas Department of Corrections labor and the work of committed volunteers, according to Williams.

The bike trails at the Nature Preserve also offer several bike repair stations, which were installed as part of a grant project.

Along with benefits to the heart and mind, trail biking can have a positive economic impact on areas that promote riding. A 2014 economic assessment



*Lynette Wood at the Greer Hill trailhead*

of the 130-mile Northeast Texas Trail by the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife projected a net positive economic benefit of \$10.48 million over 20 years for the counties of Collin, Hunt, Fannin, Delta, Lamar, Red River and Bowie.

Williams is hopeful that Mineola too will derive economic benefits from

Greer Hill as its trails become connected to the surrounding area. She envisions Mineola becoming a trail biking destination whereby cycling enthusiasts can bring their bikes aboard Amtrak, disembark and ride from the train depot to Greer Hill.

"Everything will connect eventually," she says.

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# All Aboard!

## the Harry Meredith Special

Mini train to welcome riders March thru October **by HANK MURPHY**

With the maiden voyage of the Harry Meredith Special mini train in December, Mineola added another draw to its repertoire of heritage tourism attractions.

The mini train will give free rides to the public every second and third Saturday, March through October (weather permitting). The first ride begins at 11 a.m. and the train is done for the day at 4 p.m. Children 10 and younger must be accompanied by an adult.

The Harry Meredith Special also will be available to rent for \$100 per hour. The price includes the train operator. A ride must be scheduled a month in advance and not on a day when the train makes regular runs. Call Doris Newman at 903-569-6188 for more information.

The little yellow train resembles the Union Pacific trains that travel the tracks just a few yards north of Iron Horse Square in Mineola. The Harry Meredith Special includes a locomotive and passenger cars. Iron Horse Square Park is located on Front Street, just west of the Mineola Train Depot.

Bringing the train to fruition was a more than three-year effort that originated with the Landmark Commission in February 2015. Several months later, the initiative was OK'd by the City Council. The project received funding from the Meredith Foundation in February 2017, the train was ordered from Swanee River Railroad in April 2017, and it was completed in November 2017.

Work on Steck Station – which is the train barn – commenced in April 2018, and it was finished in September. In October, volunteers began laying track, which was completed in December. Like it has in so many instances in Mineola, the Meredith Foundation provided the bulk of the financial wherewithal (\$129,942) to complete the project.

*The maiden voyage of the Harry Meredith Special mini train in Mineola*





# IN search of perfection

*Cheesecake maker finds a home in Mineola* By Hank Murphy



Fortunately for legions of East Texas cheesecake aficionados, Bryan Mendez heeded the clamor of his customers, made a career course correction, and launched Bryan's Cheesecakes in downtown Mineola.

A single chilled case showcases flavored cheesecakes bedecked with dollops of cream, swirls of icing, scrumptious crusts and other delicious adornments that appeal as much to the eye as to the taste buds.

For Mendez, his desserts' visual appeal carries the same weight as taste.

"An excellent cheesecake, first of all, has to look as delicious as it tastes," explains Mendez. "Aesthetically, it has to be beautiful, and then when they get that cake, it has to taste exactly how it looks. So if I see something over there and it's says peanut butter and chocolate or banana and lemon, or blueberry, it has to have that initial taste. ... And what makes the whole experience awesome is that soft creaminess."

He likens a fine cheesecake to a superior chocolate, not your run-of-the-mill candy bar from a grocery store. A fine

chocolate will satisfy with just a small amount because of its creamy texture and intensity of flavor.



"And that's what a good cheesecake should do," says Mendez. "Aesthetically, it has to be beautiful and it has to have that initial taste of whatever it's supposed to taste like, and then that slow melt on your tongue to where it saturates the mouth and saturates the

taste buds. And you're like, that was special."

Mendez learned how to make his special cheesecakes while attending college about 30 years ago in San Diego, Calif. While in school, he also managed a gourmet food store that carried products from a business called the Incredible Cheesecake Company.

"I loved their cheesecake, absolutely adored it but I couldn't afford it," he recalls. "I was just a struggling student."

So he started making his own cheesecake, and the woman who operated the Incredible Cheesecake Company would critique his cakes. The early reviews were harsh. But he labored on.

"I started figuring out different ways to make it, different ways to create texture. Baking is really the trick to it. Most cheesecake has basically the same things: sugar, eggs and cream cheese. It's how you bake it that makes it."

After about two years of refining his cakes, one day he took one to the lady who had critiqued his earlier work.

"I took one to her shop ... and she goes 'This is fantastic, you should sell this.'"

So he did. He sold them at a start-up deli, and he sold them at several restaurants in the area. He sold his cheesecakes for about three years while attending college.

"I actually paid a good part of my tuition selling cheesecake," Mendez notes.

Eventually, however, making and selling cheesecakes took a back seat to his tax accounting business and a family. Later, he switched careers and

*(continued on page 20)...*





# Cheesecake Search

...(continued from page 19)

went into school administration. In 2007, Mendez landed a job with the school district in Lindale. For roughly 10 years he worked in Lindale, first as the school district's director of transportation and later as dean of students at the high school. He later took a position as assistant principal at Hubbard Middle School in Tyler.

Then one fateful day, Mendez decided to open an indoor booth selling cheesecake at the Canton Marketplace.

"It just went berserk," he recalls. "We had people from all regions of Texas coming in and eating our cheesecake. It got so big that I couldn't do it out of my house anymore. I had to do it in a commercial kitchen."

He knew someone from Canton who happened to have downtown property in Mineola with – lo and behold – a kitchen.

"It took some work and money, but I put in a big oven and created my kitchen environment. About seven months ago I went ahead and started baking here. I was still doing my principal job, and I loved it," Mendez says.

However, in the summer of 2018, "business was crazy. I mean it was so busy. For two hours at our grand opening we had people out the door. We had such a following from Canton and Lindale that we didn't anticipate it being like this."

He had only a single case and a table in Mineola. There was no signage. The cheesecakes basically were marketing themselves.

Mendez, who was still working in Tyler, thought that maybe he'd open the Mineola store on weekends.

He recalled his wife looking at him and saying: "You've got to do this full-time or it's going to die, because you can't just be open on the weekends. It was nerve wracking at first, but we've never looked back. It's been an awesome move, and we love Mineola. Mineola has been so terrific for us. The people here are just excellent. They really support



**Bryan Mendez**, proprietor of Bryan's Cheesecake in Mineola

their hometown and they support their local businesses. We couldn't have a better relationship."

In Mineola, Mendez's philosophy of making cheesecake hasn't changed. He remains a perfectionist even while cranking out a minimum of 70 cakes a week and as many as 150 during the holidays.

"It really bothers me if aesthetically I don't have it consistent or it doesn't look fantastic. It doesn't go in the case. I've thrown away a lot of cheesecakes," he says.

It's important to him that his customers are satisfied with his cakes, that they feel as though they got their money's worth, according to Mendez.

"When they come in and get that perfect bite that makes me happy."





# 2019 SPRING EVENTS

## MARCH

**Mar. 1-Apr. 13:** Ellie Taylor Art Exhibit, Winnsboro Center for the Arts

**Mar. 20:** Wood County Master Gardeners rose garden workshop, Quitman

**Mar. 23:** Nature University Workshop, harvesting rainwater, Quitman

**Mar. 27:** Joe Crookston Concert, Winnsboro Center for the Arts, 7 p.m.

**Mar. 30-31:** Amtrak Wine Train embarks from and returns to Mineola

**Apr. 5-15:** The play *Suite Surrender* will be performed at the Winnsboro Center for the Arts. Friday and Saturday performances, 7:30 p.m. & Sunday performances, 2:30 p.m.

**Apr. 11-13:** Buffalo Girls Flea Market in Winnsboro

**Apr. 11-13:** Historic Highway 11 Treasure Trail in Winnsboro

**Apr. 12-13:** Mineola League of the Arts Annual Art Show, for more info: 903-569-8877

**Apr. 13:** Lone Star Dutch Oven Gathering, Mineola Civic Center, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Apr. 12-14:** Highway 80 Spring Sale

**Apr. 13:** Easter in the Park, Hawkins City Park

**Apr. 13:** Pancake Breakfast, downtown Hawkins in parking lot of former Richie's restaurant

## APRIL 20<sup>TH</sup>



(see story, page 18)

Special mini train rides with the Easter Bunny @ Iron Horse Square in Mineola

**Apr. 26-28; May 3-5:** Lake Country Playhouse presents *My Old Lady* at Select Theater, Mineola

**Apr. 27:** Dogwood Pageant in Quitman

## MAY 2<sup>ND</sup>-6<sup>TH</sup>

**May 4:** Fiesta Day in Mineola

**May 25:** Splash Park and Pavilion Center opens at Mineola Civic Center

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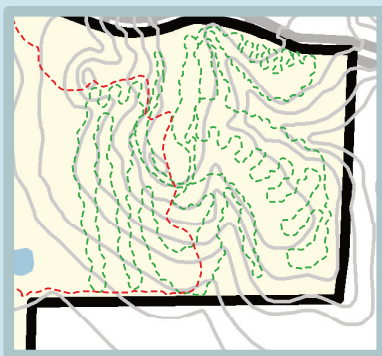
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@ Lake Fork  
(see story, page 10)

## MAY 11<sup>TH</sup>

The Mineola Metric 100 bicycle ride  
@ the Mineola Nature Preserve

(see story, page 12)



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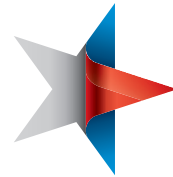
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