



CUERO: *TRAIL TO THE PAST*

By Julie Catalano Photography by Paul Bardagjy

Looking for small town Texas charm that boasts a singular past with an eye toward the future? Cuero features a growing downtown historic district whose centerpiece is an award-winning museum that gives a glimpse of life on the storied Chisholm Trail.

About 91 miles southeast of San Antonio and 98 miles south of Austin lies a hidden gem that is drawing more travelers and history buffs by the day. Named for the Spanish word meaning “hide,” as in leather, the town (pop. 6,841) is best known for being a stop on the famed Chisholm Trail — a trail in the post-Civil War era to drive longhorn cattle from Texas cattle ranches to Kansas. From 1867 to 1884, nine million head of cattle were driven by American cowboys along a trail that grew from roughly 200 to 800 miles.

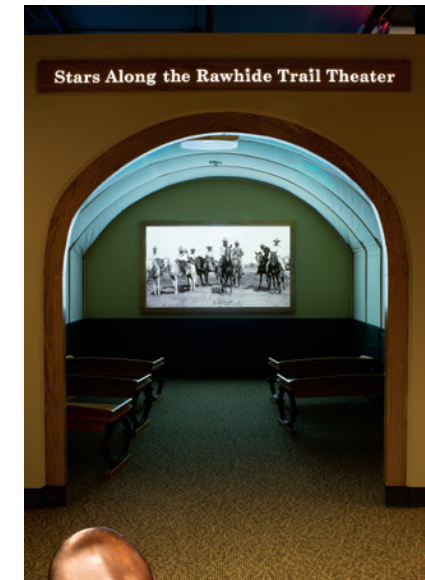
“The trail lasted only about 20 years for various reasons,” says Robert Oliver, chair of the board of directors at the Ch-

isholm Trail Heritage Museum in Cuero. “Obstacles like barbed wire that blocked the herds and their drivers from going through private property was one factor. Another was that the railroads kept moving west, arriving in Texas in the 1870s, so instead of having to drive a herd to Kansas, the cattle could be shipped by train.”

Cuero is proud of its role in the legendary Chisholm Trail. As the county seat of DeWitt County, it takes its place in history seriously — especially with regard to ongoing historic preservation efforts. Homes from the last quarter of the 19th century have been lovingly restored, and the town joined the Texas Main Street program in 2013, a statewide program for the revitalization of downtown historic districts operated through the Texas Historical Commission (THC).

The 1896 DeWitt County courthouse sits front and center in town square. It was rededicated in 2007, showcasing a meticulous inside-and-out restoration with THC funding. The center tower is visible from almost anywhere in town. A former Ford dealership is now home to the DeWitt County archives.

Without question, Cuero’s biggest restoration project is the Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum. What started as an idea in



2000 to preserve the ranching and agricultural heritage of DeWitt County and surrounding counties, became a reality when it opened its doors in 2013 in the restored 1903 Knights of Pythias Hall (meeting place of a non-sectarian fraternal organization founded in Washington DC in 1864). The \$2.4 million project was massive: after stabilizing the building’s outer shell, 100 years of exterior paint was removed. Details were replicated using historic photographs to keep the building as close to the original as possible. The rehab effort earned a 2016 Honor Award from Preservation Texas.

Inside the two-story structure, the 5,000-square-foot ground floor houses the museum exhibits. Upstairs, another 5,000 square feet is home to a multipurpose community facility for special events rental.

The permanent exhibit, Ranching Heritage of the Guadalupe River Valley, covers before and after the Great Cattle Drives of the 1800s with artifacts, interactive displays and an original short film, “Pointing Them North,” in the Stars Along the Rawhide Trail theater. The Tinker Collection is a prestigious collection of rare cowboy artifacts, on permanent loan from the Harry Ransom Center at UT-Austin.

A two-story, 4,500-square-foot museum annex was added in 2010 to bring the building up to code and accommodate ADA visitors. The restored 1892 Proctor-Green House, now a three-bedroom, three-bath guest house behind the museum, can be booked for stays through the museum.



By this summer, Oliver hopes to unveil the completed restoration of the English-German school, an 1880 schoolhouse moved to the museum grounds in 2015 from its original location on East Newman Street. In keeping with all of the other museum’s projects, the plans are ambitious — an exciting mix of past, present and future. “We plan to reconstitute the kitchen to teach canning practices,” says Oliver, “and programs to teach kids how to grow food.” Hoping to partner with former first lady Laura Bush in her Texas by Nature nonprofit, native plants will provide food for migratory birds and butterflies. To make sure that personal stories survive for future generations, “We’ve carved out a room to put in a sound studio, to take oral histories.” ♦

For more information, www.chisholmtrailmuseum.org.

