

Gotta love it

Loving County is the loneliest stretch of lonely West Texas, and that can't be all bad

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY EMILY
BLACK/SPECIAL TO THE
EXPRESS-NEWS

be back before sundown

There's no darker dark, no lonelier landscape, than what you'll find in Utah's Goblin Valley.

No one ever asks me for directions. Not if they know me, that is. For the past 11 years, I have relied on my husband to drive me around cities, foreign and familiar, figure out where we are when I've misread the map, and to find our rental car in parking lots across the country. It's not that I'm bad with directions, but when I'm with more capable navigators, my brain just shuts off. Not so today.

See VALLEY/6L



COURTESY PHOTO

The tambourine, circa 1960, that inspired 'Mr. Tambourine Man.'

Dylan's genius recalled

BY HECTOR SALDAÑA
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

NEW YORK — Before he went looking for Alicia Keys on the opening track of his recent No. 1 album "Modern Times," Bob Dylan came to Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village in 1961 looking only to invent himself.

The Morgan Library & Museum's new multimedia exhibit "Bob Dylan's American Journey, 1956-1966," which runs through Jan. 6 inside the 159-person-capacity Engelhard Gallery on its second floor, traces Dylan's mercurial adventure. His is a story that is as much the modern story of the Big Apple as is the Broadway musical spectacle and fashion runway swish.

New Yorker Gary Alony, 40, brought his wife and young children on opening weekend to the newly modernized \$106-million Morgan at 36th Street and Madison Avenue.

"He took everyday things and wrote about his experience," Alony said at a listening booth. "And it became poetry and part of America, part of our psyche."

Dylan's journey shows in his face — which changed from cherubic to angular — and in his evolving lyrics and in the social upheaval of the '60s that colors our view of the iconoclastic folk-rock legend.

Visitors are immediately struck by how everyday the young boy was, here amid the displays of personal papers, letters, guitars, photographs, movies, recordings, vinyl records, sheet music, books, articles, ticket stubs and lyrics (typed and handwritten).

Who would have ever thought that the Woody Guthrie protégé could be tongue-tied?

"I'm kind of lost for words," Dylan begins his precious entry in a Hibbing High School classmate's yearbook — signed Bob Zimmerman, of course.

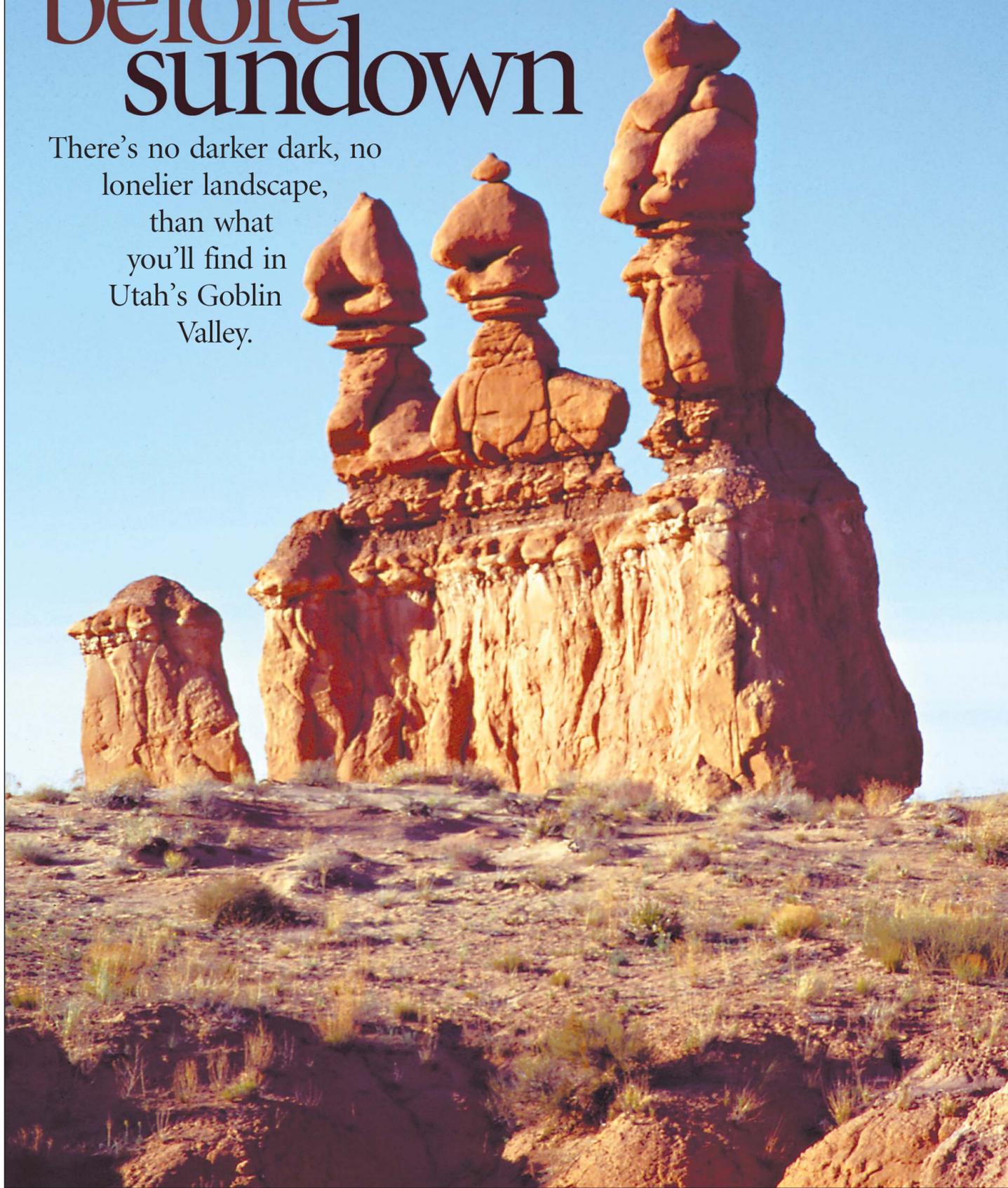
There is his English II paper: "Does John Steinbeck Sympathize With His Characters?" is in his neat cursive hand. There is the young Dylan as fan boy who traveled to Duluth, Minn., in 1959 to see Buddy Holly sing, two nights before the day the music died.

New York Times critic Robert Shelton heard something extraordinary in Dylan's desperate, howling voice that was

See EXHIBIT/4L



DYLAN IN '63



Celebrating the cowboy

In Bandera, ranching culture and history play out all year long.

BY RONA DISTENFELD
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

You can hear the horses moving around in the pre-dawn darkness as you line up for a cowboy breakfast of biscuits and sausage gravy. As the sun's first rays streak the sky, riders start to mount up.

They've come from Dallas and Floresville and as far away as Florida to help Bandera celebrate 150 years by taking part in the annual cattle drive. Many are dressed in traditional cowboy style; chaps, boots, collared shirts and cowboy hats. They ride their own horse, a friend's horse, or a horse rented from a local guest ranch.



than Bandera, the Cowboy Capital of the World?

The riders leave the Hill Country State Natural Area and head toward Bandera's Main Street. All you can see for miles are hills, live oak and cedar trees, and the occasional ranch gate. Just down the road, wranglers from the famous Y.O. Ranch are waiting with a herd of Texas longhorns, and from

that point on, all eyes are on the cattle.

By 11 a.m., longhorns and riders have reached Bandera's City Park. After the cattle slake their thirst as they cross the river, the most important part of the ride begins; the parade. Hundreds of locals and visitors line both sides of Main Street, cheering and calling to friends. And following the riders, floats and a marching band complete the holiday atmosphere on this Labor Day/Celebrate Bandera! weekend.

Small town fun, Western twang

Bandera celebrates its history and cowboy past (and present) over Labor Day, but it lives its cowboy image all year round. You won't find cattle drives, Vic-

See BANDERA/3L



RONA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

You don't have to be a real cowboy to take part in the Celebrate Bandera! cattle drive.

In Texas and getting away from y'all

Loving County has space galore, a lot of quiet and little else.

Editor's note: Many East Coast refugees make their way to Texas, but seldom chronicle their impressions with the eloquence and whimsy of John Deiner — who reminds us Texans of what we love about our home.

By JOHN DEINER
WASHINGTON POST

Nothing personal, folks, but I'm sick of you.

The stuffed subways, the endless traffic, that guy who cut in front of me at McDonald's — so many people heading in so many directions, usually mine. And it just got even worse (at least on the psyche), when the population of the United States hit 300,000,000. That's a whole lot of zeros, and Happy Meals.

To cope with the crowds, evasive action sometimes must be taken. This is why I find myself sitting in a pickup truck in the West Texas town of Mentone. Sheriff Billy Hopper; the law in these here parts, is behind the wheel, his cowboy hat balanced precariously on the dashboard.

Mentone is the main town — the only town — in Loving County, the least densely populated county in the Lower 48. Spread over 673 square miles of dusty, oil-rich West Texas, the county is home to 81 residents. That's 0.12 people per square mile.

Now there's a number I can get used to.

At first glance, Mentone is a disheveled little nothing of a town, a forgettable speck on surprisingly busy Texas 302. On second glance, it doesn't change much.

Still, it's a disarmingly authentic chunk of America, the type of place you discover by accident — or if you're lucky. Every yard appears to have enough scrap metal to build a Sherman tank, but it's hardly an eyesore: September rains have left a bounty of green and, as a result, tiny blooms poke through the junk.

I've gone to considerable trouble to get here from Washington, D.C., airport-hopping on Southwest Airlines for seven hours to Midland, then driving another 90 minutes — all for the sole purpose of escaping the mess of humanity in Our Nation's Capital. The effort is well worth it. So far, the only Mentonite I've seen is Hopper; the affable 69-year-old lawyer who's eager to show off his town to a visiting reporter.



JOHN DEINER/WASHINGTON POST

Long on oil, short on congestion, Loving County, is the least densely populated county in the Lower 48.

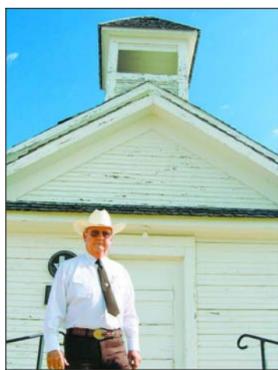
"It's different here in a lot of respects," says Hopper, who was elected two years ago. Groceries are at least 23 miles away in Pecos, and potable water has to be shipped in. "Everything you do takes a lot of extra time, a lot of extra fuel."

Eighteen people call Mentone itself home, with the rest of the county's residents scattered throughout the desert. Several hundred workers commute each day into Loving, many to service the 15 drilling rigs dotting the countryside, including two just a few paces from the town. Some of the large structures — think James Dean and "Giant," only with gleaming metal instead of wood and, uh, no James Dean — have sleeping accommodations and kitchens that, unfortunately for Mentone, make them largely self-sufficient.

Life in Mentone revolves around its stately brick courthouse, and that's where I find Hopper: The sheriff — who is also the tax assessor/collector and registrar of voters — is tucked into a room at the end of a marbled corridor, surrounded by maps, a wad of "Wanted" posters and a framed portrait of Oliver Loving, for whom the county was named. (The character of Gus McCrae in Larry McMurtry's "Lonesome Dove" is said to have been based on the wily cattle driver.)

Outside his office, three photos are thumbtacked to a bulletin board, a tribute to the three Loving Countians who have served in Iraq.

Across the street is a service station operated by Hopper's sister-in-law, and a few blocks away sits a 1910 schoolhouse-turned-church awaiting renovation. An



JOHN DEINER/WASHINGTON POST

Sheriff Billy Hopper pauses in front of a Mentone schoolhouse turned into a church. Hopper is the law in Loving County, population 81.

empty school — it closed around 1976 — is being primed for a makeover; but now it's used mainly as the venue for Mentone's annual New Year's shindig.

The town's sole restaurant is the Boot Track Cafe, hidden behind a nondescript facade (I drive by thinking it's an abandoned building) and open only a few hours each workday. It's run by Regina Derrick, the county's justice of the peace.

I suggest to Hopper that Regina could marry a couple and then cater their reception. He looks at me, shrugs and says, "S'pose so, but I don't know how that would work out. Plus, she mainly serves burgers."

When he graciously offers to show me around in his truck, I nearly call shotgun and sprint to the parking lot.

We head to the Pecos River; the

IF YOU GO

Getting there: The nearest major airport is Midland International, about 75 miles from Pecos.

Where to stay: In Pecos, choices include the Best Western and Quality Inn, with rates starting at about \$50 a night. I bunked at Laura Lodge (1000 E. Third St., [432] 445-4924, www.lauralodge.com), where \$59.95 got me a room with a comfy bed and a fridge.

Where to eat: Stop in at Mentone's Boot Track Cafe (across from the courthouse) Monday through Friday from about 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Burgers, fries and an iced tea runs about \$9. In Pecos, Mexican meals are

good, cheap and bountiful. At Alfredo's (1002 S. Cedar, [432] 445-7776), you can fill up for well under \$10. Check out the \$3.75 tamales special at La Norteña (211 E. Third St., [432] 445-3273).

What to do: The West of the Pecos Museum (First and Cedar streets, [432] 445-5076, www.westofthepecosmuseum.com; \$4) is the big gun in Pecos. The West of the Pecos Rodeo (www.pecosrodeo.com) is held around the Fourth of July, and summer brings the cantaloupe harvest.

Information: Pecos Area Chamber of Commerce, (432) 445-2406, www.pecostx.com.

into. As we ramble around Loving County, I learn more about the sheriff. He's better traveled than most anyone I know, having spent years living in Dubai, South Africa, England, Singapore and Spain while he worked in the oil industry. When family matters intervened, he returned after a decades-long absence to his hometown, once an energetic burg with hotels, a bowling alley, three grocery stores and at least five restaurants. Now there's just the Boot Track and a 25-minute drive to the nearest Wal-Mart.

"I never thought I'd end up in Mentone," he tells me, with just the slightest tinge of sadness in his voice. "Life doesn't always shell out what you'd like. But I got no complaints."

Nobody seems to get the joke in

Pecos when I refer to the town of 9,500 as the "Gateway to Mentone." But Debbie Thomas, at least, wants to play along a bit.

Thomas, the director of the West of the Pecos Museum, laughs a little, then hands me a tin badge. "We usually give these out to kids," she says, "but you seem like you'd probably want one as well." Well, yeah. After spending the morning with Sheriff Hopper, I consider myself duly deputized and pin the trophy to my T-shirt.

Pecos, proud home of the world's first rodeo in 1883, is not the prettiest place on Earth, but I've rarely met more amiable people. For many road-trippers, the town is an unavoidable stopping point, situated as it is at the crossroads between Midland/Odessa, El Paso, and Big Bend and Carlsbad Caverns national parks. All are within two or three hours of Pecos, which makes it a place — yet wildly imperfect — perfect to call it a night.

Pecos is where the hotels (mostly low-budget chains) and restaurants are, so here I am. There's also a depressing little zoo with buffaloes and ostriches stranded behind chain-link fences. I give it a drive-by inspection and flee. The Old West artifacts in the museum, however, are wonderful. I spend more than an hour poring over the exhibits, which pack three floors of a historic hotel and saloon.

I end my Pecos stay with the \$3.75 lunch special at La Norteña, the "home of world famous tamales for over 40 years."

It's about 10 p.m. and I'm back on Texas 302, a few miles southwest of Mentone. I figure now is a good time to see Loving County, the loneliest place in the Lone Star State, at its loneliest.

I figure wrong. Tankers are still thundering down the road, albeit sporadically. The drilling rigs are illuminated like NASA launch pads, and I can make out the silhouettes of men working into the night. To the south, the lights from Pecos cast a faint glow.

The farther I proceed, however, the darker it becomes. The trucks disappear.

I turn down a dirt road, stopping after 100 yards. A startled jackrabbit sprints into the brush moments before I shut off my headlights, a cartoonish puff of dust swirling behind it.

The night skies are as big and bright as all of Texas. I can't hear a sound other than a low hum from ... I don't know. Bugs? Oil wells?

I am spectacularly alone. I revel in the moment, then grab my cell phone and call my wife. I have to share this with someone.



Couples take to the floor in the Fais Do Do pavilion at the Medina Lake Cajun Festival

RONA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

More fun in Bandera

There's great live music every weekend in Bandera, fun shopping, cowboys and their cattle and the slow pace of small-town America. More than a dozen guest ranches offer every kind of get-away with horses you can imagine, from rustic to luxury resort.

Bandera is also a city of parties, as a quick glance through its events calendar at www.banderacowboycapital.com will reveal. Coming right up is a big one: the 44th Annual Hunters Bar-B-Q & Outdoor Expo on Nov. 3-5, marking the beginning of deer season for gun hunters. Hunters Weekend, as the locals call it, is known for being a big party that happens all over town. The town fills up, bands play all day long at the local bars and dance halls, and outdoors lovers shop for bargains at the expo.

Events kick off Friday at the Mansfield Park Showbarn. The Expo starts at 3 p.m.; activities include interactive exhibits, live and silent auctions and a shooting gallery. There are special activities for kids, and the barbe-

cue dinner starts at 5 p.m. with mounds of beef and all the trimmings.

This year event organizers have added skeet shooting and golf competitions. You can take part in one or both on Saturday and Sunday.

Right down the road, a Louisiana tradition has had a home for more than two decades. The Medina Lake Cajun Festival started as a gumbo cook-off, and became a full-fledged celebration of all things Cajun every September.

From boudin to bands, this is the place to sample all the tastes, sounds, and smells of southern Louisiana. Bands such as Gino Delafosse and French Rockin' Boogie and Kevin Niquin and the Ossun Playboys make the festival a regular stop, and zydeco dancers come from all over to dance the day away.

You'll see plenty of cowboys out there too, two-stepping and waltzing to the Cajun beat. Trying all the different entries in the gumbo cook-off is a must for most, too.

— Rona Distenfeld

IF YOU GO

■ Bandera Convention & Visitors Bureau
www.banderacowboycapital.com
(800) 364-3833

■ Hunters Bar-B-Q & Outdoor Expo

www.banderahuntersbbq.com
(800) 364-3833

■ Medina Lake Cajun Festival
www.cajunfestival-medinalake.com/
(800) 364-3833

Bandera celebrates cowboys year-round

CONTINUED FROM 1L

torian melodramas or an Intertribal Pow-Wow any other time of the year, but from March until November you'll find cowboy singers strolling Main Street on the weekends, sharing their music for free, and locals riding their horses into town at the end of the day when they come to share a cold one, hear some music and visit with old and new friends.

Businesses offer local flavor too, and welcome browsers all along Main Street. Stop by Art & Artisans to check out paintings and sculpture by local artists, some of whom have national reputations. Visit the Bandera General Store for old-time candy, a cowboy hat or some ice cream. Or add to your wardrobe at the many shops offering everything from straw hats to leather jackets. Everything is in easy walking distance, and benches on shady covered porches along Main Street make handy places to rest and people-watch.

Bandera is a town that likes to have a good time, and festivals and events throughout the year celebrate holidays, showcase local music and arts, and let folks try their skill at everything from bull riding to chili cooking. If you want to try a taste of cowboy life, the area has a dozen guest ranches offering every kind of horse-related experience you can imagine. From places offering lots of scheduled activities for kids, such as the Mayan Ranch, the Flying L with its high-class accommodations and 18-hole golf course, and the Dixie Dude, possibly the oldest guest ranch in Texas and a working ranch for more than 100 years, you can have the cowboy experience you want.

Cowboys and Indians

Back in 1856 when Bandera was founded, cowboys, Indians, medicine shows and stagecoaches were a regular part of the land-



PHOTOS BY RONA DISTENFELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

The Stars and Stripes fly around the arena to open the National Professional Bull Riders Challenge.

scape. Except for the cowboys, you'll have to visit the Frontier Times Museum or be in town during Celebrate Bandera or the National Day of the American Cowboy in July to get a taste of these other staples of the Old West.

Over those weekends, some of the best cowboy liars and poets continue a tradition familiar in the early days of the West with tall tales and stories of the open range. The InterTribal Pow-Wow brings members of several different American Indian tribes, including the Kiowa, Lakota Sioux, Mescalero Apache and Aztec. They come from as far away as South Dakota to take part in this Labor Day weekend event, showcasing their dances and traditions.

In the shade of the pavilion, Kiowa tribal members perform gourd dances to the beat of a drum circle. The drumming is accompanied by song, and the dancers move around the drum circle keeping their own time with shakers and the sway of their bodies. It is a spiritual rhythm that conjures mental pictures of vast, open spaces before Western civilization paved over the land.

The Aztec dancers are an ex-

cowboy tradition with regular rodeos on Friday and Saturday nights all summer long. Locals, visitors and up-and-coming circuit pros ride, rope, and race around barrels for points and glory.

During Celebrate Bandera!, the National Professional Bull Riders Association Challenge draws cowboys from all around Texas, and beyond, to test their skills against bucking, twisting bulls hoping to earn top prize money. Staying on until the buzzer sounds is just half the battle; both rider and bull need to perform well to earn points.

Bandera is full of good music and great dance halls all year long, so those wanting a taste of Bandera's every-weekend nightlife can walk over to Arky Blue's Silver Dollar Saloon, the Bandera Saloon, the Cabaret or Blue Gene's.

The Silver Dollar is a landmark, and it's not hard to find a middle-aged local who will tell you he remembers running around in there while his parents danced when he was just a kid.

Whether you come for Bandera's official celebrations or any other time of the year, you'll find a town that takes you back to a time when things were slower-paced, families did things together, and welcoming smiles from strangers made you feel good to be there. Just don't be surprised to see horses "parked" along Main Street next to the cars!



Tony Two Hawks teaches this cowboy to throw a tomahawk.

plosion of color and energy. The rhythms are fast, the dances athletic and acrobatic, and the costumes remind us that the Aztecs were warriors in a land of bright plumage and gold.

Bulls and bands

Bandera celebrates another

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