

# finding INDEPENDENCE★

in WASHINGTON COUNTY

BY HOWARD PEACOCK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL VAN OVERBEEK



One morning recently, a young tour guide was steering a group of visitors through the Blue Bell Creamery in Brenham, explaining the ways that the company makes the dream-food that *Time* magazine has called “the best ice cream in the world.” Her descriptions were going smoothly until she made a statement that dropped the jaw of a man in the group. “Beg your pardon, young lady,” the man interrupted. “Did you say it takes the milk of FIFTEEN THOUSAND cows to make one day’s supply of ice cream?” He sounded incredulous and skeptical at the same time. He was having trouble getting a mental picture of that many cows. “No, sir, I’m sorry if it sounded that way,” she replied. “It’s FIFTY thousand cows.”

That fact is one of the wonders of a visit to Washington County. Think of it: 50,000 cows being milked twice daily to serve our “sweet teeth” for just one day. How that milk gets delivered to the plant on a dawn-to-dawn, 24/7 schedule, then mixed into dozens of flavors of ice cream, packed into various-size containers or put on sticks, purified, frozen, and tasting just dandy, and then delivered to stores near and very far, is another wonder to ponder while eating a glob of Homemade Vanilla or Cookies ‘n Cream.



Bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush color a roadside in rural Washington County. At Barrington Living History Farm (top), interpreter Mark Sanders helps visitors learn about 19th-Century life. Above, Alejandra Ray at Bevers Kitchen in Chappell Hill shows off the restaurant’s famous pies.

(★and **BRENNHAM, BURTON, CHAPPELL HILL,** and **WASHINGTON, too!**)





**YOU WILL DISAPPOINT 50,000 COWS** within a 250-mile radius, and mistreat your own taste buds, gullet, and soul if you fail to visit the Blue Bell Creamery on your holiday in Brenham.

#### BREHAM

A number of picturesque towns dot the gently rolling hills and vales of Washington County, among them, **Independence** (pop. 140), **Chappell Hill** (600), **Burton** (361), **Washington** (265), and **Brenham** (13,867). The last of these serves as county seat and major hub of goings-on in the area. Other towns, such as Wesley, Earlywine, and William Penn also remain. Long ago, there were even more towns, with such names as Mustang, Tigertown, Turkey Creek, and Mount Vernon. They've gone the way of ghost towns, or less-than ghosts.

Brenham's gingerbread cottages and plantation-style mansions hint at its colorful and complex past. Settlers started filtering into the area from the States about 170 years ago. Finding the surrounding soils marvelously fertile, they put down deep roots. The town itself grew from a

100-acre land grant while Texas was part of Mexico. In 1844, Brenham was designated the county seat, edging out Independence by three votes.

The strong Germanic influences in the architecture, stonework, and customs that grace the community developed from sizable immigrations from Europe in the late 1800s.

Today, Brenham adds a note of hustle and bustle to the quiet rustle of the countryside. The Downtown Historic District draws shoppers from near and far to find bargains in antiques—this town is big on antiques—and specialty items, as well as general merchandise. It's also an artistic center.

Here are sketches of several places that have proved popular with tourists and locals alike. They compose a sample



of the variety ready for your visit to Washington County.

#### Ellison's Greenhouses

If you're a gardener, an amateur or professional decorator, an artist inspired by nature's dramatic colors and forms, a homesick citizen of the tropics, or a "Christmas person" all year round, you're due for a knockout thrill at Ellison's Greenhouses.

Bossed by a cheery whirlwind called "PJ," this virtual Hall of Fame for Green Thumbs grows, shows, and sells all kinds of garden and potted plants seven days a week. But Ellison's is especially famous for its poinsettias and Easter lilies. The

staff ships out 15,000 or more pots of Easter lilies for the rites of spring, then nurses and nurturs more than 80,000 prime poinsettias, all grown from cuttings, for the winter holiday season.

"I love to see the expression on the faces in our tour groups when they see all those poinsettias," PJ says. "The same holds true for visitors when they get their first glimpse of the Easter lilies."

Jim and Ellen Ellison, PJ's parents, started the operation some 35 years ago when Jim worked for the Texas Department of Agriculture. They built the original greenhouses on nights and weekends. Today, enclosed greenhouses cover five acres, and shade greenhouses cover another two acres.

Jim and Ellen recently retired and turned the firm over to their daughter, Mrs. PJ Ellison-Kalil.

#### Pleasant Hill Winery

From an old, carefully reconstructed barn on top of Pleasant Hill, this winery offers a serene view of vineyards that produce the grapes for 15 varieties of wine. Weekend tours lead you through the "wine-growing" process, from vine to fruit to wine. You're invited to sip samples in the tasting room and browse the gift shop for souvenirs and wines. Bob and Jeanne Cottle carry on the wine-growing traditions of their Old World families at 1141 Salem Road, on the south edge of Brenham. You can volunteer for the annual "Grape Crush"—stomping the ripened fruit—on certain dates in July and August. Call for particulars.

#### Blue Bell Creamery

You will disappoint 50,000 cows within a 250-mile radius of Brenham, and mistreat your own taste buds, gullet, and soul if you fail to visit the Blue Bell Creamery on your holiday in Brenham.

The same goes for your family. Do you want that on your conscience, much less your stomach? Here's where 63 known flavors of Blue Bell are created, plus an "X" number of potential new flavors being taste-tested by experts just like you, except they get paid for doing the work.



Whether you're walking, like Addie, Faith, Hope, and Joy Ash (above, in Independence), or bicycling (left, on Texas 105), Washington County offers sites aplenty that you can soak up at your own pace.



church in Texas holding continuous services—since 1839.

Next door, a modest museum tells the story of Independence and some of its colorful residents. Sam Houston, Texas' No. 1 hero, and his wife, Margaret Lea, moved into town with her mother in 1853. The two women convinced Sam, a noteworthy sinner, to get baptized. The story goes that just before Sam was lowered into the waters of little Rocky Creek to have his sins symbolically washed away, he muttered to the preacher, "God help the fishes down below."

#### Antique Rose Emporium

The spot in Independence where you're likely to linger longest is the original Antique Rose Emporium. Master horticulturist and owner Mike Shoup says you'll find some 2,000 rose bushes and vines whose lineages trace back to the 17th and 18th centuries, plus a few species from Biblical times. Many antique roses bear names of feminine delicacy, such as Ballerina and Granny Grimmetts, and many waft perfume. But don't be fooled. Antique roses are tough old gals, unlike vulnerable and nitpicky modern hybrids. The old ones have survived and carried their genes intact through centuries of droughts, floods, freezes, scald-

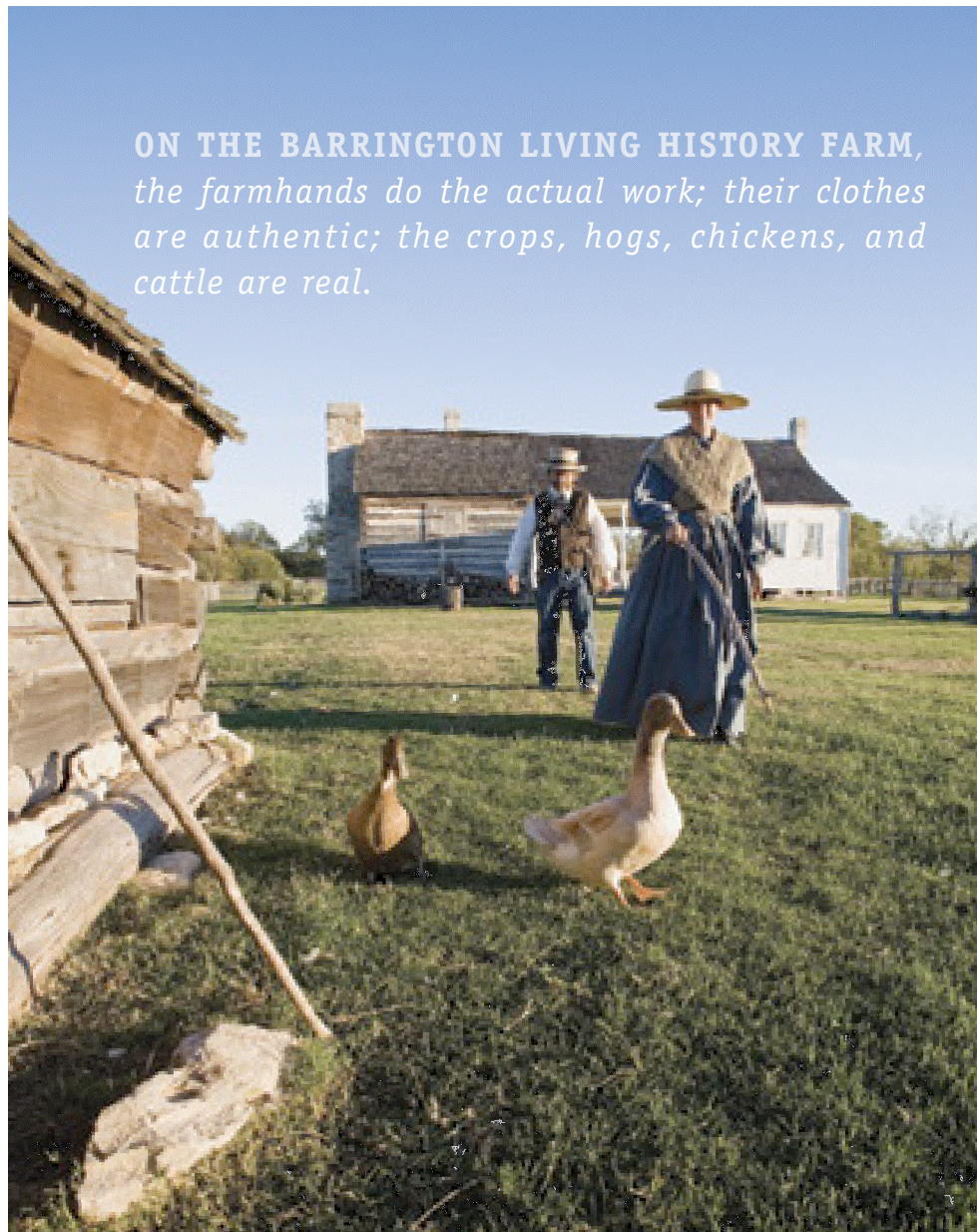
#### INDEPENDENCE

More than a few people say this village has a palpable aura. As you enter it on FM 50, you'll see four brick columns rising starkly out of a parklike grove; they're the remains of "Old Baylor," the founding place of today's Baylor University in Waco. On the northwest corner of the intersection with FM 390, you'll find the oldest Baptist

Cows along Texas 105 (top) just may believe that Washington County is heaven. Members of the FFA from Austin's Lanier High School sample Blue Bell ice cream at the creamery's Hospitality Room in Brenham.



ON THE BARRINGTON LIVING HISTORY FARM, the farmhands do the actual work; their clothes are authentic; the crops, hogs, chickens, and cattle are real.



ing winds, stingy soils, overuse, severe neglect, and other hostile environments, flowering all the while with a blush or a glow. The Emporium also sells herbs and a full stock of nursery plants. It offers for rent a reception center/meeting hall and a wedding chapel in a gorgeous field of bluebonnets.

#### WASHINGTON-ON-THE-BRAZOS

The beautifully weathered structure here, Independence Hall, takes its place beside the Alamo and San Jacinto as a true shrine of the Texas saga. On March 2, 1836, 59 grim and determined pioneers from the provinces gathered here to decide on action in dealing with oppressive government in Mexico. Led by the forceful presence and reasoning of Sam Houston, they drafted a Declaration of Independence and established a Constitution for a “free, sovereign, and independent Republic of Texas.” That rebellion pointed the way to 10 years as a nation, then to statehood in the United States. In a gigantic “domino effect,” it then led to the Mexican War of 1846-48, victory for the United States, and the winning of 500,000 square miles of western territories now known as New Mexico, Arizona, and California, plus parts of Colorado, Utah, and Nevada.

Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site and Park, embracing 293 acres, includes the superb Star of the Republic Museum, a “living history” farm, and a Visitor Center complete with a gift shop, outstanding exhibits, an amphitheater, and a conference center. From the Visitor Center, an all-weather walking trail extends for a half-mile to the reconstructed Independence Hall, thence to a bluff overlooking the Brazos River. Spanish traders used this trail in early eras, and before them, the First Americans. A picnic ground at the river offers tables, grills, restrooms, and shelters.

#### Barrington Living History Farm

If you or your children wonder what daily life was like on a Texas farm in the “really old days,” say the 1850s, answers come alive on the Barrington Living History Farm. The farmhands do the actual work; their clothes are authentic;



the crops, hogs, chickens, and cattle are real. The perspiring woman pulling weeds in the vegetable garden in the afternoon sun is very real. Even the seeds for the garden and the crops are of vintage heritage.

The house itself was the original home of the last president of the Republic of Texas, Anson Jones, and was named for his Massachusetts home, Great Barrington. It's all 1850 reality, re born

#### Star of the Republic Museum

Just up the road, the impressive Star of the Republic Museum explores, preserves, and interprets the story of Texas as a nation, from 1836 through 1845, carrying out those missions with factual and imaginative style on two floors. A new, 10,000-square-foot exhibition center de-

picts the people and events of that turbulent period through art, artifacts, film, and hands-on interactive technology.

#### Tiny “Triggers”

Make an appointment a few days ahead with Bob and Dorcas Jenkins to stop by their Rio Red Ranches on FM 1155 East, a short drive south of Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site. The couple raises national champion miniature horses there, even multi-champions, a title given for winning more than one major championship. Bob and Dorcas have raised so many champions they were invited to the 2005 Emmy Award ceremonies, where they showed the stars the minis and answered questions about the horses.

So what distinguishes a genuine minia-



ture horse from a regular horse? “A miniature can be no taller than 34 inches at the withers,” Bob says, “measured from the last hairs of the mane.”

“Most miniatures have a sweet nature,” he adds. “They like to be hugged and can even be housebroken. One man keeps a miniature horse in his New York apartment.”

Developed as a distinct breed some



Janice Campbell, the lead domestic interpreter at Barrington Living History Farm (top), tends to the ducks and other animals the old-fashioned way. Above, 4-H Club members from Victoria listen as Gus Wehring explains the workings of his family's shoe shop, part of the Burton Cotton Gin & Museum.

Brandon Nickerson rides a horse past one of Dayton Wodrich's historical murals in Independence, which is also home of the original Antique Rose Emporium (above, right).





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The miniature horses at Rio Red Ranches endear themselves to visitors. Margaret Lea Houston, Sam's widow, lived in this 1830s home in Independence from 1863 to 1867.

#### Lavender Farm & Shop

You stopped to smell the roses in Independence. Now take another break, and roll down FM 1155 to Dillard Road, where you can inhale one of the most admired and useful aromas in the history of the human nose. Debbie and Jim McDowell grow and tend some 3,000 lavender plants here. They put that fabulous fragrance into soap, sachets, essential oils, tea, bath and shower gel, and other luxuries, all offered in their gift shop by the road. If you like, starting in midsummer, you can walk the fields and cut stems of the lovely blue-violet flowers to take home. Folk medicine practically the world over has used this plant to treat various ailments, including depression, anxiety, and fatigue. Here you can smell to your heart's content.

#### CHAPPELL HILL

Would you believe that this hamlet, founded in 1847 by a woman who named it for her grandfather, gave birth to two colleges: Chappell Hill Female College and Soule University? Those institutions no longer remain, but educational fer-

vor lives on in the Chappell Hill Historical Museum, probably the most ambitious museum you've ever seen in a town this size. Go there.

The Female College taught mathematics, philosophy, ancient and modern languages, science, music, history, and art. Amazing! It lasted until 1912, then

**"MINIATURE HORSES like to be hugged and can even be housebroken. One man keeps a miniature horse in his New York apartment," says Bob Jenkins of Rio Red Ranches.**

closed, the victim of falling enrollment and inadequate funding. Soule University, chartered in 1856, raised three companies of "Lancers" among its students during the Civil War; they were proudly armed with lances made by a local blacksmith. In 1859, Soule moved to Georgetown and became Southwestern University.

Buildings on picture-postcard Main Street date from the 1850s. The elegant structure at the corner of Main and Chestnut streets served as a stagecoach stop in the late 1800s. Chappell Hill throws two big festivals annually, one in spring at the peak of the bluebonnet blooms, and a truly remarkable Scarecrow Festival



The Yegua Spit & Whittle Society (from left, Mike Shoup Sr., Allen Commander, Bill Burnap, restaurant owner Silvio Gennaro, server Kenneth Baginski, and Paul Pomeroy) enjoy antipasti and vino at Volare Italian Restaurant in Brenham.



The Texana Cigar and Coffee Shop offers cigars, roasted and flavored coffees, gifts, and Texas memorabilia on Main Street in Chappell Hill.

around Halloween. You never saw so many and such fanciful scarecrows.

Enjoy lunch at Bevers Kitchen on the "main drag." Try the chicken-blue cheese-avocado salad with a side of homemade onion rings, topped off with cobbler or bread pudding for dessert.

#### BURTON

Burton is a "cotton-pickin'" town in the highest and most historic sense of the word. It's not only the home of the Cotton Gin Festival each April (April 21-23, 2006), which draws thousands of celebrants, it's also the throne of "Lady B," a rare survivor of the Industrial Revolution era in America. The old cotton gin is so notable a mechanical wonder that the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., sent its curator emeritus of mechanical and civil engineering to Burton to authenticate it and advise on its restoration. Decades ago, Lady B suffered a crippling breakdown and virtual abandonment in its old cobwebbed barn. But today, it "does its thing" again—gins bales of cotton (separates the fluffy fibers from seeds and "trash") by piston-power, instead of the 4,000-year-old method of bleeding hands, or Eli Whitney's hand-cranking device. Lady B's way revolutionized a world industry forever.

But Lady B isn't the only feature of Burton, by far. The cotton museum here relates a seminal kind of farm life in America's past. You can start with the museum's wall display of cotton-quilting patterns and other exhibits, then step

## essentials WASHINGTON COUNTY

BREHAM, seat of Washington Co., is on US 290, about halfway between Austin and Houston. The city's downtown historic district is part of the Main Street Program, which is sponsored by the Natl. Trust for Historic Preservation and the Texas Historical Commission. Washington Co. is a focal point of the Texas Independence Trail. The area code is 979.

You'll need Washington County's 2006 Visitor's Guide to learn about scores of interesting and enjoyable places and some 26 festivals, from Mar. to Dec. Guides are free at your hotel or at the Washington Co. Chamber of Commerce, 314 S. Austin, Brenham 77833; 836-3695 or 888/BREHAM (273-6426); www.brenhamtexas.com.

**CONTACT INFORMATION** for places mentioned in story:

**Ellison's Greenhouses**, 2107 E. Stone St., Brenham 77833. Open daily; 836-6011; www.ellisonsgreenhouses.com.

**Pleasant Hill Winery**, 1441 Salem Rd., Brenham 77833; 830-VINE (8463); www.pleasanthillwinery.com.

**Blue Bell Creamery**, (mailing address: Box 1807, Brenham 77834), on Loop 577. Tours weekdays at 10, 11, 1, 1:30, 2, and 2:30. Fee. Call ahead, 800/327-8135; www.bluebell.com.

**Antique Rose Emporium** (at Independence; mailing address: 9300 Lueckmeyer Rd., Brenham 77833); 979/836-5548 or 800/441-0002; www.antiqueroseemporium.com.

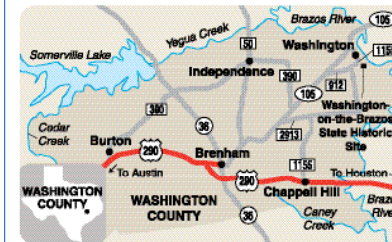
**Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site** (mailing address: Box 305, Washington 77880); 936/878-2214; tpwd.state.tx.us.

**Star of the Republic Museum**, Washington; 936/878-2461; birthplaceoftexas.com.

**Rio Red Ranches**, which raises miniature horses, is at 16747 FM 1155 E., Washington 77880; 936/878-9997; www.rioredranches.com.

over to the early-20th-Century leather-working shop of an 1882 German immigrant, William Wehring, and his bride, Alwine Kluck, of Groszolle, Germany.

Don't leave without taking snapshots on the porch of the Burton Cafe and biting into its signature dish, a juicy, one-third-pound burger and a pile of beer-battered onion rings. For modern French cooking on weekends, treat yourself to a memorable meal at the Brazos Belle Restaurant, just across the road. ★



**Chappell Hill Lavender Farm** (mailing address: 2250 Dillard Rd., Brenham 77833); 251-8114; www.chappellhilllavender.com.

**Burton Cotton Gin & Museum**, 307 N. Main, Burton, 289-8114; cottonginmuseum.org.

#### LODGING AND DINING

**Accommodations** in the county: 9 hotel-resort properties, 30 bed-and-breakfast inns.

**Restaurants:** 34, offering a wide choice of menus and ambiances, from gourmet kitchens in Brenham such as **Volare Italian Restaurant** (836-1514) and **Ernie's** (866-7545), and the **Brazos Belle** (in Burton; 289-2677) to great sandwiches and ice cream at **Must Be Heaven** (830-8536), burgers and pie at the **Burton Cafe** (289-3849), and super salads and desserts at **Bevers Kitchen** in Chappell Hill (836-4178).

#### ENTERTAINMENT

**Unity Theatre**, in downtown Brenham, a non-profit theater with professional actors on an intimate stage; reservations recommended. Call 830-7656.

**Blinn College Theater Arts Program**, musical and choral performances and guest entertainers. Call 830-4024.

**International Festival-Institute at Round Top**, 27 miles west of Brenham; performances by internationally-recognized musicians and conductors in a European-style, 1,100-seat concert hall. Call 249-3129; www.festivalhill.org

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Award-winning photographer WILL VAN OVERBEEK of Austin contributes to numerous national and regional magazines, and to books such as Fodor's *Compass American Guides Texas*, *The Food of Texas: Authentic Recipes from the Lone Star State*, and *Aggies: Life in the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M*.