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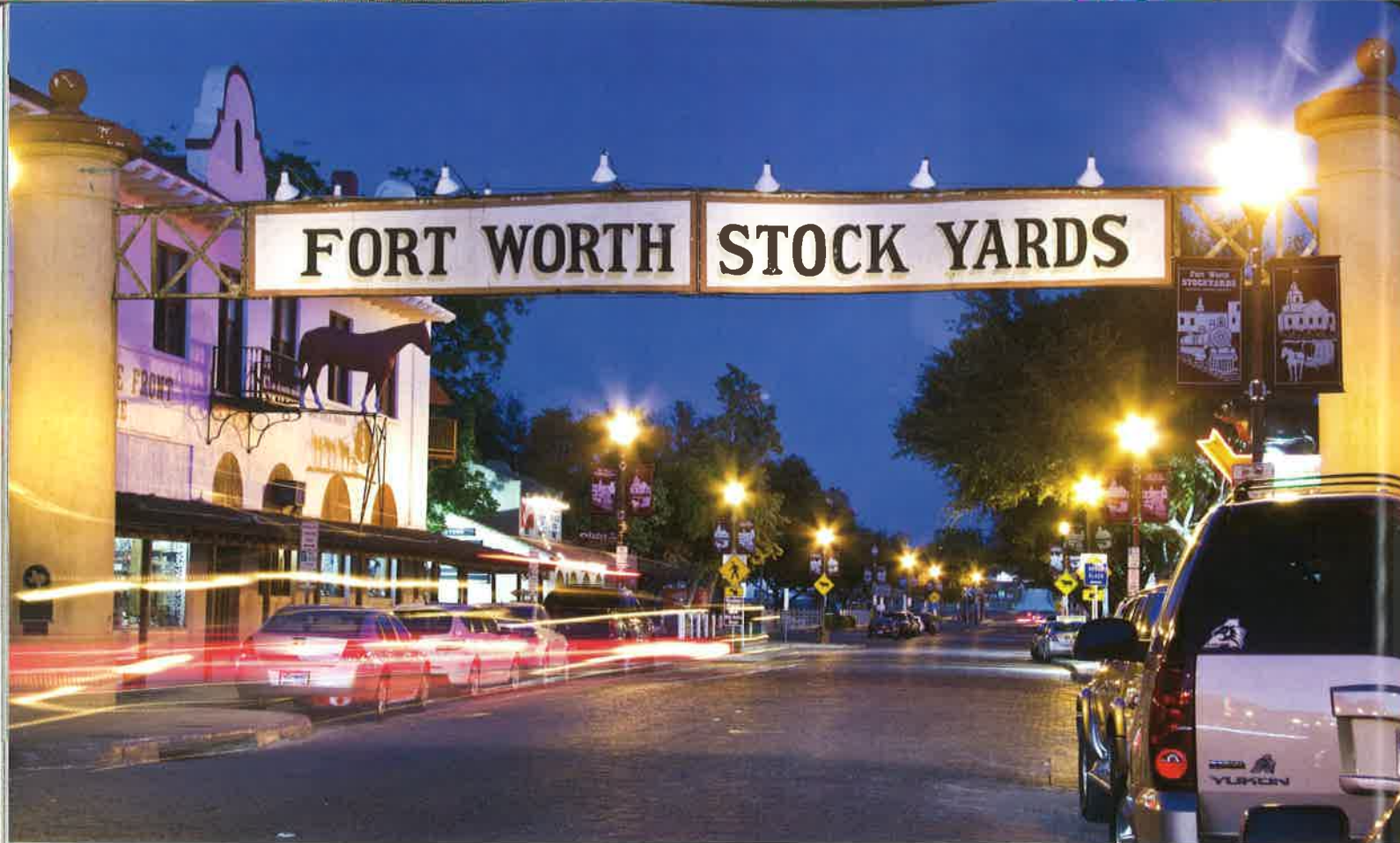
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HOW *the* WEST WAS SPUN

No fort but worth it anyway

BY CATHERINE MATUSOW

Fun at night: The Stockyards

THROUGHOUT AN ENTIRE LONG WEEKEND spent in Fort Worth, I found myself constantly on the lookout for the perfect pair of cowboy boots, which wouldn't be odd if I hadn't lived in Houston for over 30 years without experiencing a similar craving. Back home, I had only a passing relationship with the western look. It was a once-a-year thing, something optional. Here, it seemed to me, I might need to ride the range on a moment's notice, and if so, I needed to be ready, by which I meant in possession of a stylish pair with a flair, boots that were comfortable yet cute, and—important—not \$700. (Cowboy culture was captivating, but I wasn't crazy.)

And as I wandered through every shop in the Fort Worth Stockyards, I began to feel like a cousin of mine from up north, a cousin who, upon landing in Houston last fall, suddenly felt a similar craving for boots which she later satisfied at the South Loop Cavender's. Just as boots had turned her into an instant Houstonian, Fort Worth was turning me into my cousin Tara from Philadelphia. The experience was dizzying, to say the least.

Every moment one spends in the Stockyards is a heightened one. The smells

from the weekend's rodeo seem a magical aroma, the honky tonks a feast for the eyes and ears. The jokes seem funnier—my husband and I laughed uproariously when he remarked that the former live-stock market, which dates to the 1860s, looked like Astroworld's old Western Junction, only with real cows. The insights seem more profound. (Suddenly, it hit me: stock market. *Stock market*. And, *stock exchange*. Crazy, right?)

I felt like a cowgirl smoking pot.

The tone of the evening had been set from the moment we parked next to an old couple relaxing on a Harley, *full-on making out*. And just as I began to doubt I would witness such awesomeness again in my lifetime, what do I see at the White Elephant Saloon? A gray-haired man in shorts and black socks twirling his partner on the dance floor, a woman who was as stunning a vision of advanced age as a tan pantsuit allows. Nothing elicited such a loud cheer from the city's oldest bar as those two—not the appealing country-western band, not the college kids gamely stumbling through the two-step in flip-flops, and not the White Elephant's walls, lined though they were with shelves full of pale pachyderms and hats left behind by cowboys passing through.

Clearly, it was time for us to let the buzz fade, and to that end, we sat for a long time critiquing the talent on the dance floor while staying put in the comfort and safety of our table. But then we made the ill-fated decision to visit Billy Bob's Texas, which was a bit like trying to get sober in a swimming pool full of beer. If the Stockyards are Astroworld, this place is Disneyworld, a nightclub proudly known



The Kimbell's new Renzo Piano building

as "The World's Largest Honky Tonk," complete with gift shop, photo-ops, and tourists galore. Once more my husband and I went into gaga mode, grooving on the autographed concrete handprints of all the greats who've played there, and we weren't the only ones. Several of the hands—those of Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, Blake Shelton, and others—were covered in lipstick kisses. Still, nothing could top my husband's unbridled astonishment, his transcendent bliss, upon discovering that his hands are the exact same size as Johnny Cash's. From that moment to this, his life has seemed complete.

We spent the next afternoon trying to recover from the previous night's excitement, passing a very civil hour sipping iced tea inside the new wing of the Kimbell Art Museum, our efforts partly thwarted by our Billy Bob's hand stamps, apparently as indelible as the scarlet letter. Gradually, however, a mood of peaceful contemplation descended even while we were bathed in the natural light of this minimalist building by Renzo Piano, which just opened last November and resembles another of Piano's buildings, the Menil Collection. The structure itself is as much an attraction as its fascinating exhibition of samurai armor, on view through the end of August. In fact, the same goes for the Kimbell's original building—designed by Louis I. Kahn—the Amon Carter Museum by Philip Johnson, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth by Tadao Ando. All are worth a visit for the architecture alone.

It was at the latter that we ran into a friend who had moved to Dallas a few years prior. He told us he'd been disappointed by that city's museums, and so made regular weekend forays to Fort Worth. I don't know who came up with the tagline City of Cowboys and Culture, but that person deserves a bonus.

Actually, I might suggest Cowboys, Culture, and Comestibles, as the eating is excellent here too, particularly at places like the Woodshed Smokehouse on the Trinity River, which big-deal

OPEN ROAD



Woodshed Smokehouse

chef Tim Love opened a couple years back. The menu is as unique as it is interesting, with tacos, pork *banh mi*, and ramen served up alongside traditional plates of barbecue. The ice house-style restaurant doesn't take reservations, but our meal was well worth the 30-minute wait: Texas butter-dipped radishes, venison sausage with grilled flatbread and house-made mustard, Mexican corn on the cob, and brisket that was juicy perfection. What stole the show, though, was an order of *bulgogi* and *kimchi* tacos. A crave-worthy combination of well-spiced and tender Korean-style beef, pickled cabbage, and corn tortillas, the dish is—no exaggeration here—worth the four-hour drive all by itself.

Whether it's cowboy boots, honky tonk, museum-going or barbecue, Fort Worth has a knack for finding the exotic in the familiar, and the Coyote Drive-In is no exception in that regard. This three-screen outdoor theater, just like the ones Houston used to have, has only been open since last year, but if the Sunday-night crowd I observed is any indication, the appeal of the drive-in movie is eternal, especially when you add a bar and restaurant to the premises. I can't tell you why it's so fun to sit back with your bare feet on the dashboard, plastic cup of wine in hand, a breeze blowing through the car as you watch *Spider-Man 2* with the Fort Worth skyline as a backdrop. But I can tell you this, ye nostalgia-minded, entrepreneurial types: if you rebuild it, they will come.

From the drive-in, it's a short drive downtown, where we stayed in the historic Ashton Hotel, a lovely, well-appointed, friendly place just a stone's throw from the city's revitalized Sundance Square. Every time we wandered past, folks were making good use of the seating under the square's 32-foot umbrellas, children were playing contentedly in the jetted fountains in front of the famous Chisholm Trail Mural, and diners were hanging out lazily on the patio at Bird Café, the perfect spot to split a cheese plate and a salad and watch the world go by.

Of course, no visit to Fort Worth is complete without paying a daytime visit to the Stockyards to watch its herd of cattle driven through the streets. This we did on our final afternoon, also stopping by the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame, where we dutifully tipped our hats to Dr. Red Duke and Nolan Ryan, and the National Cowgirl Museum in the cultural district. To be truthful, however, returning to the scene of our earlier crimes filled my husband and me not with shame but longing. There's nothing like a Friday or Saturday night in the Stockyards, a dazzling, vaguely hallucinogenic trip that might be dangerous if it were more affordable.

Except, wait. It is. Remember those cowboy boots I wanted? Seeing the handsome specimens at M.L. Leddy's, Maverick, and Fincher's, I broke down and started trying them on. And wouldn't you know it—I found a relatively affordable pair, its pre-distressed brown leather making it look like I'd spent a long day driving cattle. Okay, maybe nobody's buying that, but I did buy the boots, thereby confirming that inside me is a real Texan waiting to get out, and Fort Worth is her gateway, in more ways than one.



Impossible to resist

MUSEUM: COURTESY KIMBELL ART MUSEUM
FOOD: COURTESY CHEF TIM LOVE
BOOTS: COURTESY MORTEN RAND-HENDRIKSEN

STOCKYARDS: COURTESY BRANDI KORTE