

T H E

C O W B O Y

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In the heart of Texas and Louisiana Creole Country, a deep-rooted tradition of horseback trail rides and backwoods parties is the glue that holds a culture together.

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ON A COOL Saturday afternoon in rural, backwoods, where-the-heck-am-I southeast

Texas, a procession of cowboys and cowgirls on horseback trots down Farm Road 1301—the sort of road where you might spot lolling cows lounging in the sun, freshly rolled cylinders of hay in an open field or the remains of hapless wild pigs and raccoons decaying along the shoulders. Way out ahead, leading the group, two riders proudly hoist the American and Texan flags, and in front of them, decked out in black denim and rhinestones, Betty Love marshals the oddball parade, her regal, ten-gallon hat bobbing with her horse's gait.

When Love went on her first trail ride nearly 20 years ago, she didn't know anything about the "cowboy way." She didn't know what a party wagon was. Or a muleskinner. In fact, she was so unprepared that her brothers—who'd dragged her along—had to go out and buy her a pair of jeans. Now, Love is the president of the "Betty Love Ryders"—a small, eight-person riding club that, for the past 11 years, has hosted this annual "trail ride."

Trail rides are a decades-old fixture of southeast Texas and southern Louisiana culture. Hosted by countless local riding groups, some stretch for hundreds of miles and can last for weeks (like the journeys from Hidalgo, TX and Logansport, LA to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo). Most rides, though—like Love's—are only a few miles long and take place on weekend afternoons between



two nights of hard partying. Typically, a trail ride leaves from an open field where riders feast on Cajun cuisine and dance to zydeco music. It all culminates when hundreds of men, women and children—some donning Stetsons and spurs—parade down backwoods country roads on horseback to celebrate their heritage as cowboys.

It's just an hour's drive from Houston southeast to the tiny town of Danciger, TX, but it feels like a million miles away from the metropolis. A scattering of ranches and small homes propped up on concrete blocks, it's so remote and scarcely populated that my car's GPS unit doesn't even recognize the name.

The staging ground for my inaugural trail ride—when at last I find it on Friday afternoon—is a 62-acre pasture owned by Jack and Lily White, who use it for breeding cattle. The pasture, like many in the area, is partly shadowed by pecan trees, whose Jurassic limbs and bearded branches sway in a wind that carries the sweet, springy smells of fertility that are characteristic of the Gulf Coast. High above the tan-green grass, a turkey vulture swoops through tornado-gray skies. Incoming riders park their trucks, RVs and horse trailers in a "wagon circle" near a patch of grass that some wild pigs dug up last night. The riders, who don't bother sidestepping the hardened clumps of horse manure, gather inside an open-walled pavilion that used to store hay but is, today, party headquarters,



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complete with a makeshift \$2-a-beer bar and a dancefloor made of pallets and plywood.

I'm wearing the best cowboy outfit I could muster: A neat, blue Oxford and a ragged pair of jeans, which, as an ensemble, make me appear less like a rugged ranchhand and more an out-of-work accountant. Being northern and white in a very southern and mostly black crowd, I initially feel out of place, but handshakes and hellos from strangers quickly help me feel at home.

Love, a high-energy, warm-hearted African-American lady dressed in a red jumpsuit and ball cap, takes a break from directing traffic and doling out orders to her club's riders (who are also dressed

in red to mark them as hosts) to give me a hug. Her phone won't stop ringing, she tells me, pausing to catch her breath. By weekday, Love is a corrections officer at a nearby penitentiary, but by weekend, this is her life—dedicated trail rider and occasional bringer together of people.

In the hay pavilion, be-denimed cowboys and cowgirls, some with belt buckles as big as horseshoes, line dance to the "Michael Jackson Shuffle," sway tenderly against one another to a country western number by Chris Young, and shake booties and gyrate hips to hip-hop. The DJ—Magic Man Ricky D (real name Ricky Cooper)—has been playing music at trail rides for the past 30 years.

Standing between two speakers as big as refrigerators, he nods his head to the next track, a zydeco song—an upbeat, fast-paced style common in Louisiana that has ingredients of hip-hop, R&B and country stirred into the broth of accordion- and scrub board-happy Creole music.

All of this transplanted culture is the direct result of a transfusion that began in the early 1900s when Louisiana Creoles—a term used to describe people of mixed African and European heritage—migrated to Texas to work in oil towns. Today, southeast Texas towns like Danciger and cities like Houston have much in common with Louisiana. Just as the flavors of Louisiana Cajun cuisine—zesty boudin, fried crawfish, chicken and sausage jambalaya—spice up the local cuisine, the accordion wails on either side of the border.

"At first, a lot of people down here didn't get zydeco," says Ricky

HORSEPLAY (clockwise from this page) Dre Vollbaum, 15, with his horse "Co Co"; Chad Arceneaux says he may not be a rancher, but he knows it's in his blood; Organizer Betty Love, center, heads up the trail ride; John Harrison, 15, practices his lasso skills



A HAND IN THE ACTION (clockwise from this page) A rider pats her horse's flanks before the group heads out on the ride; "Midnight," right, shares a joke with wagon master Albert Joseph; DJ Richie Rich mixes it up for passengers on a "party wagon"

D. "They didn't know too much about it, or about country western. They heard it, but they wasn't used to listening to it until people started bringing it to trail rides. Before, we were listening to R&B and the blues. Then it started gradually catching on to country. Then it went to the zydeco."

It's 3am before the party finally dies down. As dancers stumble to their RVs, I pitch my tiny, ultra-light, one-person tent. ("We know you ain't gonna have no company in there," property owner Jack White teases, to raucous laughter.) In the late morning, awaking to neighs, the thud of hooves and more booming zydeco, I emerge from my tent to a frolicsome horseland—a Rohan of shiny-muscle stallions "lunging" around cavalymen and women, some of whom are decked out in full cowboy regalia. As a suburbanite from upstate New York, horses are about as familiar to me as zoological wonders of ancient

myth, and only slightly less terrifying. But still, I'm determined to at least touch one. When I find an unwitting candidate, I warily extend a finger to the horse's caramel-colored flank. There's a brief moment of connection between man and beast, when its skin twitches involuntarily and I, scared, yank my finger back and beat a hasty retreat, hoping that nobody saw me.

Wandering among the various riding groups, I happen upon Roderick DeVaughn-David, 35, a soft-spoken, gentle-mannered rider from the "Hard Left" club, who's been riding horses since he was, as he puts it, "knee high to the grasshopper," and who tries to join a trail ride every weekend of the year. "It's a part of my heritage," he says. "My great granddad was a muleskinner. My granddad was a muleskinner. My dad was a muleskinner. Country boys rode horses and roped cows. We're from the country. We didn't want bicycles

or toys. We wanted horses."

There are a few riders like Love, who didn't start riding until late in life, but most have been around horses since birth. This passion for riding among Creole communities isn't a trend; it's a part of a cultural heritage that's been passed down for generations, going all the way back to the 19th century when 25 percent of Texan cowboys were black, according to Census data.

Cowboys today, though, ride horses primarily for recreation. But by putting together these trail rides, organizers are able to turn the event into something much more than a mere hobby. Trail riding, Betty Love tells me, creates strong communities. As is the tradition for all trail rides, Love uses the proceeds to support charitable organizations and for scholarships for local students. She's raised \$1,100 for a local woman with multiple sclerosis and will be using the proceeds of this \$10-a-head ride



to help a family member pay for indoor plumbing. In fact, at one of her first events, a friend told Love (whose real last name is Lemon-Sanders), “Every time I see you, you’re always giving something. We gonna name you the Betty Love Ryders.” The name stuck.

“These days, there are a lot of things going on that aren’t positive,” says DeVaughn-David. “It’s all positive here. It’s all family-oriented. We bring the kids out. We bring out the party wagons. When you come to a trail ride, it’s not like you’re isolated by generation. Everybody’s just one big happy family.” But while community bonding and fundraising remain in the back of everybody’s mind, having a rollicking good time seems to be at the forefront.

I’ve secretly harbored fantasies of mounting my first horse for the trail ride, but terrible visions of being

catapulted Christopher Reeve-style or taking a back-kick to the forehead make me opt for a seat aboard one of three “party wagons.” Drawn by trucks or mules, each wagon carries coolers of beer, a DJ, speakers blaring zydeco and those of us deemed unfit to ride, including my new companions, a brood of little girls. From the back of the party wagon, I watch hundreds of men and women on horseback squeeze to one side of a two-lane country road, their heads bouncing up and down rhythmically like bobbleheads. Occasionally, a graceful mare gallops pell-mell in the scruffy grass between the road and the thick of the Texan jungle.

Altogether, between 200 and 300 riders have come together from far-flung riding groups such as “Big 8” from Branch, LA, “Back Street Riders” from Houston and “M and D” from Texas City. Some riders guzzle sweaty bottles of Miller Lite and josh around while

others, with chins held high, stoically bask in the simple pleasures of riding a horse and being surrounded by friends and family.

In the middle of it all, I realize that I’m witnessing something special—a community as a living organism, bonded together by a shared passion and tradition, by an exuberance and love for life.

Later in the day, after the ride winds down at Jack and Lily’s place, I drive to nearby West Columbia (pop. 4,255)—a standard American town that has your standard American town things: Big box stores and fast food chains, gas stations and diners with large TVs playing CNN. It strikes me, then, how the Creole cowboys—despite being surrounded by the homogenizing influences of modern comfort and convenience—have managed to maintain a cultural identity of their own. The trail ride, it seems, is a kind of mobile, thousand-legged “cultural preserve,” a slice of protected wild land in the midst of a sprawling civilization, a refuge where their way of life can flourish undisturbed, and where culture prevails and will continue to prevail so long as the trail ride remains less about abstractly “celebrating one’s heritage” and more about drinking, dancing, riding and having fun, which is, after all, what brings riders back week after week.

It makes me think back to the party wagon, where a father holding his baby daughter had succinctly summed up that sentiment. Amid a moment of quiet reverie, he leaned over to me and said, “Yes, we drink. Yes, we ride. Yes, we dance. Yes, we gonna have a good time. It’s not really all about that, though. It’s about the kids.” At the time, I thought he was being melodramatic. But now, with a trail ride under my belt, I think I understand. ●

SADDLE UP

While most organizers promote trail rides by word of mouth and leaving flyers on windshields, some clubs list their events on zydecoevents.com a few weeks beforehand. It’s impossible to provide a comprehensive list, but here are a few upcoming events that contain some combination of trail riding, Cajun food and zydeco.



HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW AND RODEO TRAIL RIDES

Houston, TX; Mid-February
It began in 1952, when four men rode their horses 75 miles from Brenham, TX to Houston to publicize the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. The next year there were 80 riders. Today, more than 3,000 ride for days along 12 traditional cow-droving trails—one as long as 386 miles—to kick off the 20-day (Feb 28 to March 18) rodeo, livestock competition and barbecue contest.
hlsr.com

LIL NATE’S SECOND ANNUAL L’ARGENT TRAILRIDE & CHICKEN RUN

Leonville, LA; Feb. 17-19
zydecoevents.com/louisiana-zydeco.html

HERITAGE DAY RODEO

Humble, TX; Feb. 25
bpcca.com

CREOLE HERITAGE ZYDECO & CRAWFISH FESTIVAL
Baytown, TX; Apr. 13-14
creolejambalaya.com