

Press Release

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NATIONAL RANCHING HERITAGE CENTER PRESERVES HISTORY OF RANCHING

How early ranchers and their families adapted to a harsh environment is a story of self-reliance told through 52 structures preserved in the historic park at the National Ranching Heritage Center (NRHC) at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Because all but five structures date between 100 and 200 years old, the historical park speaks volumes about the frontier settlers who lived in those structures and created legends and history in the process.

Visitors can almost hear George Jowell vow in the 1870s to build a stone house that Indians couldn't burn down. Or they can listen for gunshots reverberating through time as cowboys rid their half-dugout of an intruding rattlesnake.

"Our historical park is much more than buildings," explains NRHC Executive Director Jim Bret Campbell. "Ranching and the westward movement of America share the same chapter in the history books. Together they tell the story of ranch families who moved out of their dugouts and log cabins to build the houses, schools, churches and cities that millions now call 'home.'

Campbell said the ranching structures assembled in the historic park were chosen to represent the birth, growth and maturity of ranching in the region west of the Mississippi River just as Colonial Williamsburg represents the nation's history east of the Mississippi.

Although the indoor museum and outdoor historical park were not formally dedicated until 1976, the concept of a center to preserve and interpret the history of ranching began in 1966. The result was a unique public-private partnership between Texas Tech University and the Ranching Heritage Association, a non-profit member organization that supports the mission and programs of the NRHC.

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Today the center charges no admission and offers visitors a 19-acre historical park and a 44,000-square-foot museum with seven galleries of Western exhibits. The total complex covers 27 acres on the northern edge of the Texas Tech campus and includes historic ranch structures that have been relocated and restored.

“In 1880, almost everyone in West Texas lived in dugouts,” Campbell said. “The vast rangeland of the southern Great Plains offered no shelter other than a hole in the ground. How the ranchers and their families adapted to such a harsh frontier environment is a story told through the structures they built.”

The historic structures have been arranged chronologically to exhibit the evolution of ranch life from the late 1700s through the mid-1900s. All the structures but one were relocated, restored and furnished for period correctness. A 1.5-mile paved pathway provides wheelchair and stroller access to each structure. Posted signs give a history of the structures in both English and Spanish.

“The center has more than 60,000 visitors a year from throughout the world and hosts 5,000 to 8,000 children annually on school field trips,” said Julie Hodges, Helen DeVitt Jones Endowed Director of Education. Hodges oversees the educational programs of the center as well as the community volunteers who make frontier life come alive during public events.

TripAdvisor, the world’s largest online travel advisory site, has awarded the NRHC a Certificate of Excellence for “consistently great reviews” and named it the No. 1 tourist attraction in the Lubbock area for five consecutive years.

The atmosphere created by the outdoor park may be the greatest attraction of the center. “The park makes visitors feel they’re in a rural area in another time and place even though the massive Texas Tech campus is just over the hill,” Campbell said. Those hills on the flat plains are actually berms created by moving and covering the debris left from the 1970 tornado that damaged downtown Lubbock. Native grasses and wildflowers cover the berms, and trees provide shade along the park pathway.

Designed to commemorate the open-range era in the West, the NRHC entrance dramatically features 19 life-size rangy bronzes of Longhorn steers that were cast in a variety of poses before being strung out to resemble a walking herd. Each steer weighs 750 pounds and carries the brand of its donor. The brands represent some of the most historic ranches in Texas.

The moment a visitor drives past that walking herd is the moment when the epic story of ranching and the nation’s westward expansion begins to unfold for a new generation.

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