

Pared-down

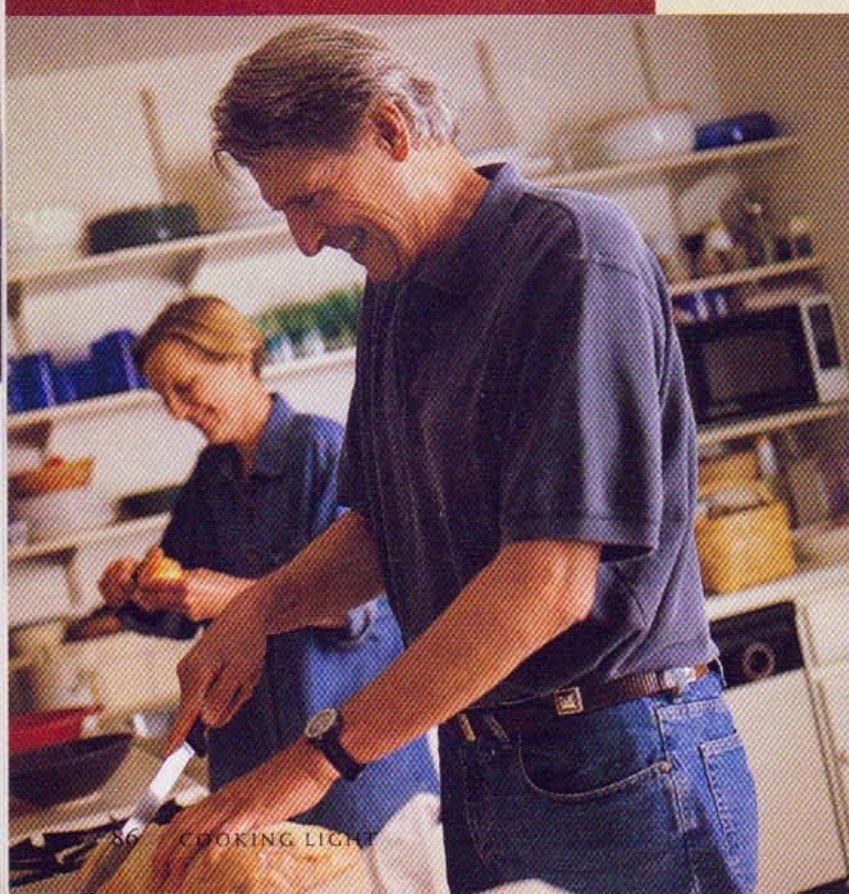
This Texas couple simplified their lives by figuring out what they truly needed. By Joe Nick Patoski



It's another glorious day in the small far-west Texas town of Alpine, the sharp sunlight radiant atop Hancock Mountain—a rugged hill rising 500 feet above the campus of Sul Ross State University. Robert and Mimi Dopson normally time their daily 60-minute trek so they can reach the summit just as the sun drops behind the mountains that lie some 30 miles west across the highlands, a vast sea of tall grasses thick with deer and antelope. "Quite a view," Mimi says, looking back as her husband catches up. The panorama is of the West of the imagination, almost too good to be true. "We love being outside," she adds. "We work outside; we eat outside. We glaze pottery outside, almost all year-round. We think we're in paradise."

The 50-something couple came to Alpine five years ago from Austin. Together they'd reared a family and built a successful business there—Robert was a dentist, Mimi his office manager. But they had reached a new stage in their lives and decided the time was right to strike out, to try something different. Robert happened to pick up a book, *Cashing In on the American Dream: How to Retire at 35* by Paul Terhorst, that changed their lives. It advocated living simply, and Robert and Mimi took its lessons to heart.

They found the courage to commit to serious lifestyle changes, agreeing to get rid of the trappings of success and things they didn't truly need. But it didn't happen overnight. "It took us seven years just to get out of debt," Robert recalls. Quitting their country club, moving into a smaller house, and trading the Mercedes and four other cars for more modest vehicles were the first steps. Next, they quit competing in tennis ("our knees didn't like it"), but—determined to stay active—they took up swimming at Barton Springs and Deep Eddy pools in Austin, bicycling around the Texas Hill Country, and doing

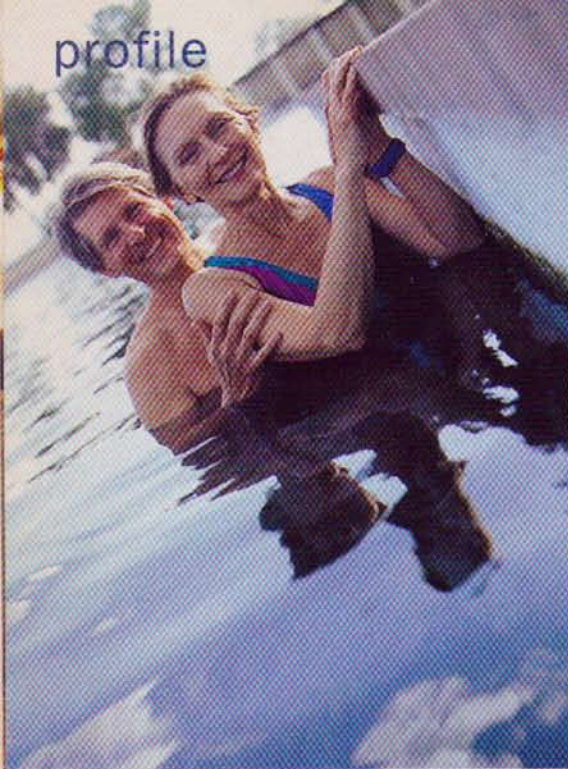


PHOTOGRAPHY: COLLEEN DUFFLEY

paradise



Here, creativity is a commandment: Mimi Dopson works a potter's wheel in her home studio.



Idyllic days for the Dopsons: swimming, hiking, and making pottery to their hearts' content.

yoga together. Robert even got hooked on rowing. But they were ready for more.

THE DOPSONS FIRST headed west in December of 1994, when Robert took a six-month job providing dental care for indigent people in Hobbs, a flat, dusty cattle-and-oil town in eastern New Mexico. Locking up their Austin home and selling Robert's practice, they headed out. Mimi took a crash course—through on-the-job training—as a dental assistant, while Robert discovered his new patients' oral health was such that "we took out more teeth than we filled." But although their jobs were rewarding, when winter turned to spring, the Dopsons longed to see water again after so much dry desert. They found their oasis 150 miles to the southeast in Balmorhea, Texas, where they spent their weekends swimming an hour twice a day (the town is home to the world's largest spring-fed swimming pool), riding bikes, and enjoying the clean air and horizons before driving back to Hobbs for work.

Once the six-month stint ended, "we originally thought we'd go back to Austin," Mimi says. Instead, they took jobs making desserts and salads at a restaurant in Balmorhea and swam away the summer. "We loved it," she recalls. "All we had with us was a futon, two plastic chairs, two bikes. We were like kids."

That lasted until Labor Day, when the restaurant closed after its summer season. Before figuring out what to do next, the Dopsons drove 60 miles to Alpine to buy groceries and catch up on current events, poring over *The New York Times* and other newspapers in the Sul Ross library. Visiting the campus gave Mimi an idea: Since the semester there had just started, she suggested they split up, sit in on some classes, and compare notes at day's end. Both decided they wanted to stay in Alpine and attend school there. Robert opted for Spanish and guitar classes, while Mimi dove into ceramics. "To me, it was psychological," she says. "I'd never taken an art class." Before the semester's end, they had bought a home near the campus, sold their other house in Austin, and moved to Alpine for good.

Mimi passed the pottery bug on to Robert. Though he'd worked with his hands all his life, ceramics gave him an artistic outlet he'd never explored before. The newfound obsession carried over to summer workshops, first in Red Deer, Alberta, and last year in Mashiko, Japan. The couple had a pottery studio with an in-house wheel and a kiln installed in the garage out back. When their adult children came to visit, they couldn't help but notice their parents were having fun. "My son William said coming here was like summer camp—a



little hiking, a little biking, swimming, doing pottery," Mimi says.

Still, there have been compromises. Instead of choosing from the produce and gourmet products available back in Austin, they shop at a small grocery store, and they've joined the Big Bend food co-op to buy natural foods trucked in once a month from Tucson. They've adapted easily to the switch; fresh vegetables and fruits are staples on their home menus. "You learn to buy things when they're in season," Mimi says.

"We work outside; we eat outside. We think we're in paradise."

The sage, basil, lemon verbena, Mexican marigolds, and other herbs and flowers that adorn their patio often end up in homemade breads, soups, and salads. But the aromas of the herbs, especially, help make the patio a living area. "We didn't want the feeling of closing out the world," says Mimi. "We wanted to bring the world in."

The path that led them from big city to small town was a convoluted one, both agree. "If we had carefully researched it and picked out the ideal retirement town, it would have turned out differently," Robert says. "We don't know what we'll be doing three years from now. All we know is we like what we're doing."

Joe Nick Patoski is a senior writer at Texas Monthly magazine.

Fort Davis Apple Cake

"Orchards in Fort Davis, Texas, sell boxes of apples in the fall. We always buy a box and store it in the refrigerator until holiday baking time. Then we make several cakes to give as Christmas gifts." *-Mimi Dopson*

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| CAKE: | 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract |
| 2 cups all-purpose flour | 3 large eggs, lightly beaten |
| 1 1/2 cups sugar | 3 cups chopped peeled Rome apple |
| 1 teaspoon baking soda | Cooking spray |
| 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon | GLAZE: |
| 1/4 teaspoon salt | 3/4 cup sugar |
| 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg | 1/2 cup low-fat buttermilk |
| 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves | 1 tablespoon light-colored corn syrup |
| 1/2 cup water | 1/2 teaspoon baking soda |
| 1/4 cup butter or stick margarine, melted | 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract |
| 1/4 cup olive oil | |

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. To prepare cake, lightly spoon flour into dry measuring cups; level with a knife. Combine flour and next 6 ingredients (flour through cloves) in a large bowl. Add water and next 4 ingredients (water through eggs); stir just until well-blended. Fold in apple. Spoon batter into a 12-cup Bundt pan coated with cooking spray. Bake at 350° for 50 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pan 10 minutes on a wire rack; remove from pan. Cool completely on wire rack.
3. To prepare glaze, combine 3/4 cup sugar, buttermilk, syrup, and baking soda in a medium saucepan. Cook over medium heat 6 minutes or until sugar dissolves and mixture is light brown, stirring constantly. Stir in vanilla. Pour over cake. Yield: 16 servings (serving size: 1 slice).

CALORIES 257 (27% from fat); FAT 7.7g (sat 2.7g, mono 3.8g, poly 0.7g); PROTEIN 3.2g; CARB 44.7g; FIBER 0.9g; CHOL 49mg; IRON 1mg; SODIUM 203mg; CALC 21mg

