

STEEPED IN TRADITION

A 21ST CENTURY COWGIRL RAISES ORGANIC, GRASS-FED BEEF ON THE HISTORIC SAN JULIAN, CONTINUING A RANCHING TRADITION HER FAMILY ESTABLISHED EIGHT GENERATIONS AGO.

Although the sun's out today as I navigate the sweeping bends in the ranchlands west of Houston, last night's torrential downpour has dumped eight inches of rain overnight and swelled the Brazos River over its banks. My Jeep cuts a motorboat-like wake through roadway puddles that have become veritable lakes. As the gushing water flows over dips in the road from the already saturated fields, I top a rise and spot several dozen riders—the Desperados I'm looking for—their yellow slickers gleaming in the mid-winter grayness as their mounts slosh through the mud.

By SUSAN L. EBERT ~ Photography by SALLIE GILLISPIE



Even a good drenching can't dampen the spirits of the Desperados, who have designated this day for their "Warm-Up Ride" in preparation for the main event: when they join up with up to 5,000 other riders converging in Houston to celebrate the opening of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

Everything's bigger in Texas, this is no exception: It's the largest trail ride in the world.

The idea for the ride hatched around a lunch counter in Brenham, Texas, back in 1952: Mayor Reese Lockett and three of his buddies, reminiscing about the old cattle drive routes, decided to saddle up and follow the old Salt Grass Trail into Houston for the opening of Houston Fat Stock Show. Lockett soon had newspapers and television stations vying for coverage. As they rode toward Houston, a dozen or so other riders fell in. By the end of that decade, Lockett's little "publicity stunt" had swelled to more than 2,000 riders accompanied by nearly 100 wagons and comprised men, women, and children from all walks of life.

Celebrating its 65th anniversary this year, the Salt Grass Trail Ride boasts more than 1,500 riders and 28 wagons. Furthermore, it planted

the seeds for a dozen more trail rides, 10 from across Texas and two others originating in Logansport, Louisiana and Reynosa, Mexico (see sidebar). All thirteen trail rides—each with its own distinct personality—merge in Houston's Memorial Park for the Downtown Rodeo Parade that opens the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. But arguably none can match the exuberance of "The Granddaddy of 'Em All," the Salt Grass.

The ride takes its name from the region's signature salt grass, which does not die back during winter as do other grasses. Early cattlemen would overwinter their herds on the mineral-rich, salt-tolerant, thick grass to fatten up before driving them east to market in New Orleans.

Among the Salt Grass Trail Ride's 28 wagons, arguably none are as fashion-conscious as the Desperados, Wagon No. 13. Small wonder that this is the group Western fashion designer Pat Dahnke has ridden with for the past 30 years, and that she serves as the dress code officer. "We took some ribbing when we first started wearing matching outfits," she says, "but now it's caught on and every major wagon coordinates their outfits. With the Salt Grass Trail Ride stretching out for a mile or more as we wend our way to Houston, it's such an impressive sight."





Beverly Wilson Smith, who serves as wagon boss, is the longest-riding woman in the Desperados, having participated for 42 years. Dahnke's daughter Tara, the group's wrangler, has also been with the Desperados for 30 years, riding with her mother since she was a child. As do the other trail rides, the Desperados welcome new participants, and have hosted riders from Singapore, Iraq, Germany, and France.

Life on the Trail

The warm-up ride that I'm witnessing today is much like what the first Saturday of the trail ride will be: An 8-mile circle ride to get everyone tuned up for the ride.

"Sunday, it really starts," says Dahnke. "Cattle call is at 6 a.m., and the first thing we do is feed and water the horses. Then, breakfast and breaking camp: the camp movers must have all the motorhomes, trucks, and trailers out before the ride begins at 8:30 a.m. We'll cover from 15 to 18 miles a day, breaking for lunch at noon and back in the saddle by 12:45 p.m. We'll ride until 4:30 or 5, feed and water the horses and have a great supper from the cook shack. Then, the campfires, music, and dancing begin."

They'll repeat this schedule for a full week, before converging with the other trail rides uniting in Houston.

Much like today, March weather in Texas can be capricious, bringing torrential rains, cold snaps, and the occasional tornado to test the riders' mettle. "One year we had a tornado come through at 4 p.m., just as we were making camp," says Dahnke. "Foot-and-a-half-thick trees were snapping like toothpicks, and the sky turned bruised purplish black with an ominous yellow glow. It was no big deal to the horses—they were used to being out in the elements—and their calmness helped keep the riders calm."

Lest the schedule sound too formidable, I glean a few tidbits that rarely make it outside the Desperados (what happens on the ride, stays on the ride, after all). With the vague references to wild pajama parties ... luxurious motor home parties ... hilarious costume parties complete with Elvis and Billy Gibbons look-alikes ... dancing on tables until they splintered ... the ride also delivers plenty of fun and shenanigans as well as regimented discipline. Friendships bloom, romances blossom, and family ties are strengthened.

"People in the Western world are so genuine and down-to-earth," says Dahnke. "We have riders from all walks of life, all sharing this common experience. Everyone's looking around to see what they can help someone else with, whether it's a broken strap, a thrown shoe, whatever. After sharing the week together, it's almost overwhelming when we finally ride into the city and join thousands more riders for the Downtown Rodeo Parade. There's nothing like it in the world." 🐾





THE THIRTEEN TRAIL RIDES

Hankering to experience the camaraderie of a multi-day trail ride capped off with over-the-top pageantry? Trail riders come not only from Texas, but from across the country and around the world. Each trail ride has its own personality, so see which one best suits your style.

Los Vaqueros originate in Reynosa, Mexico, cross the border at Hidalgo, Texas, and ride 386 miles. They've participated for 44 years. Two of their five wagons are equipped for handicapped children so that 10 to 12 special needs children can experience the ride for a day or two.

Originating at the historical San Antonio Mission Espada, the Mission Trail Ride covers 235 miles and has 27 years under its belt. The ride celebrates the early cattle drives that went east to New Orleans. Over the years, it's provided more than \$150,000 in scholarship grants and educational programs.

Northeastern Trail Ride, now in its 25th year, begins in Beaumont and covers 108 miles. This trail ride pays homage to the Buffalo Soldiers, and considers their ride to be a spiritual journey. It's donated \$30,000 to Prairie View A&M University each year for the past 10 years.

The Logansport Louisiana-based Old Spanish Trail Ride, participating in its 62nd year, covers the second-longest route after Los Vaqueros, trekking 206 miles. The ride makes an annual stop at an assisted-living home in Livingston, Texas, to share their experiences with the residents.

Prairie View Trail Ride, known as the "Mother" of the Black Trails, joined the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 1958, becoming the first African-American HLSR trail ride and the oldest in the U.S. They ride 87 miles from Hempstead, Texas, and focus their charitable efforts on public schools.

Salt Grass Trail Ride, celebrating its 65th anniversary, covers 101 miles from its starting point in Cat Spring, Texas. With 1,500 riders and 28 wagons, it's both the longest-running and largest of the trail rides. Salt Grass has awarded a show scholarship for the past consecutive nine years.

The 63-year-old Sam Houston Trail Ride is the second-oldest trail ride after the Salt Grass, and follows the 70-mile route that Sam Houston took from Montgomery, Texas, to Houston in the mid-1800s. Their charitable efforts include local fire departments and graduating high school seniors.

Heading out from Rosenberg, Texas, the Southwest Trail Ride covers 120 miles. Now in its 24th year, Southwest has as its mission to perpetuate the heritage of the black cowboy and to support the youth of Harris and surrounding counties through education, scholarship, and community service.

Southwestern Trail Ride emanates from West Columbia, Texas, and covers 100 miles. Now in its 44th year, it's given more than \$80,000 in college scholarships and makes annual stops at elementary schools along the way to educate youth about the trail ride and to give them wagon rides.

Saddling up in Shepherd, Texas for its 109-mile ride, the 57-year-old Spanish Trail Ride prides itself on being a family ride dedicating to teaching young people about the hardships and rewards of pioneer life. It supports a number of 4-H and FFA chapters in its members' hometowns.

Texas Cattlemen's Trail Ride, launching from Magnolia, Texas, is in its 32nd year and covers 70 miles. This ride comprises retired policemen, U.S. veterans, and their families and features the Support Our Troops Wagon, which bears the dog tags of every fallen soldier from Montgomery County from the Korean War to the present. Fifty-six-year-old Texas Independence Trail Ride covers 108 miles from its origin in Brazoria, Texas. The ride splintered off from the Salt Grass Trail Ride in 1961, and prides itself on its authenticity. The ride focuses its charitable giving on assisting families with unexpected illnesses and other life tragedies.

Valley Lodge Trail Ride begins in Brookshire, Texas, and rides 75 miles to Houston. Now in its 58th year, Valley Lodge has earned the moniker of the "Champagne Ride" for its longstanding reputation for gourmet meals. Valley Lodge was the third ride to receive its charter from the HLSR.