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Cal Farley's Boys Ranch

BY MELINDA RICE

UP IN THE TEXAS PANHANDLE, the Canadian River slices across the Caprock to form a starkly beautiful valley called the Canadian Breaks. It's here, in Oldham County, where cattle still outnumber people, that Texas' Wild West past smacks squarely into a vibrant bit of its present.

What was once a rowdy cowtown is now a bustling community northwest of Amarillo, dedicated to giving disadvantaged children, in the words of its founder, "a shirttail to hang onto."

The campus of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, founded in 1939, sprawls across the former site of Tascosa, a raucous frontier settlement that anchored the southern end of the Tascosa-Dodge City Trail. "It's a beautiful place, out of the ordinary," says 17-year-old Callie, who has lived on the ranch since she was six. Its picturesque campus, tidy barns, and pretty sunsets combine to create a special place she is happy to call home.

For a while, the town served as the county seat, and could claim seven saloons, one significant but unlucky duck, gunfights in its dusty streets, and a Boot Hill Cemetery, which now draws visitors instead of permanent residents. For the 250-plus students now living at the ranch, history isn't just a subject they study in



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For the 200-plus students who live at Boys Ranch, chores and camaraderie go hand in hand. Above, Kristin, Amber, Ryan, Daniel, Russell, Garrett, and Shane take a break from a familiar routine—adding fresh dirt to one of the livestock pens.

school—it's something they can see right outside their windows. As they walk from their classrooms to the barns or their residence halls, they're treading in the boot steps of Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, and Charles Goodnight (the cattle baron who was the model for Woodrow Call in Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Lonesome Dove*).

In keeping with its Old West heritage, Boys Ranch stages a popular student-run rodeo every year over Labor Day weekend that draws visitors from across the United States.

"The general premise of the rodeo hasn't changed since the day Cal Farley started it," says Mike Pacino, assistant administrator for campus operations. "The kids practice, learn skills, get confidence. And that's so important."

Just ask Callie.

Recalling when she arrived at Boys Ranch 11 years ago, she says, "I'd never ridden a horse or even been to a rodeo." At six, she was old enough to ride a calf in the rodeo and agreed to give it a shot. She was "a little anxious" approaching her bovine mount the first time. "But after that, they couldn't keep me off of them!" says Callie. She rode calves until she was nine and went on to compete in other rodeo events, including barrel-racing and pole-bending.

Eighteen-year-old Robert doesn't want to do anything else but compete in rodeos. He has just graduated from Boys Ranch High School and plans to ride bulls professionally while pursuing an associate degree in farm and ranch management. "It's all I want to do, just ride bulls. I love it," he says. This from a young man who describes himself as "a little punk skater" when he arrived at Boys Ranch five years ago.

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In keeping with its Old West heritage, Boys Ranch stages a popular student-run rodeo each Labor Day weekend that draws visitors from across the United States.



Boys Ranch residents train all the colts raised on the ranch. Here, Daniel, one of the older boys, rides a young horse around a pen as he teaches him to change leads.

The kids compete in everything from stick-horse events (for the youngest contestants) and bull-riding to barrel-racing and breakaway roping. They also operate the concession stand, play in the band, and help with parking and other myriad tasks involved in running a rodeo.

"It sounds like rodeo just consumes us, but we're about so much more," says Mike Pacino. And indeed, the ranch has more than 100 programs going on during the year, including intramural sports, fire-fighting training, a vocational mentorship program, and a chapel program.

CAL FARLEY'S BOYS RANCH is on US 385, 36 miles northwest of Amarillo, on the site of Old Tascosa in Oldham Co. From Amarillo, take FM 1061 to US 385, go north (right) for a few miles, and turn right at the well-marked entrance. The ranch headquarters is the first building on the right; open daily 8-5, closed major holidays.

Tours of Boys Ranch, which are free and include historic Boot Hill Cemetery and the Julian Bivins Museum, can be scheduled for almost any time (reservations not required, but appreciated). Call 800/687-3722 weekdays, 806/534-2211 on weekends. Write to Box 1890, Amarillo 79174-0001; www.calfarley.org. For a listing of annual events at Boys Ranch, see page 63.

The 11,000-acre ranch is a full-fledged, self-supporting community with its own barns and livestock, fire department, and independent school district. The school has an active drama department, and its cross-country team took first place in state competition last year. The ranch also hosts an annual Youth Cowboy Poetry & Music Gathering that has gained attention nationwide. Remember Robert,

the bull rider? He is such a good performer that he has been invited to recite cowboy poetry at national events in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and Elko, Nevada, as has his younger brother Russell.

Not bad for a place that started with 120 acres and nine boys living with a caretaker couple in the old Tascosa courthouse.

It had long been the dream of Amarillo businessman Cal Farley, a former professional wrestler, to "help the boy nobody wanted." In 1939, rancher Julian Bivins, stirred by his friend's vision, donated the land and courthouse to Farley's cause. By 1941, 25 boys were living in the building, and Farley was just getting started.

He promoted the ranch relentlessly—on his daily radio program, with bond drives, and, beginning in 1944, with the rodeo that remains so popular today. National publications, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, published stories, and MGM released a feature film called *Boys' Ranch* in 1946. The ranch continued to expand and began admitting girls in 1992. (A separate campus called Girlstown U.S.A., near Whiteface, became an affiliate of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch in 1987 and admits only adolescent girls.)

Children live in homes with a set of houseparents, go to school, do chores, and participate in extracurricular activi-

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ties. All services are provided at no cost to the children or their families.

“Cal Farley, in my mind, was a genius in the way he set the Boys Ranch up,” says former U.S. Representative Bill Sarpalius, a one-time Boys Ranch resident. “It’s not tied to any church or civic group or anything. No government funds. It’s supported by the public.”

Bill, who now serves on the board of the ranch’s alumni association, arrived at the ranch with his two younger brothers 10 days before his 13th birthday. The brothers had been living in abandoned buildings in Houston, digging food and clothes out of trashcans. “Boys Ranch was the first school I ever went to for a full year,” says Bill. He was in the fifth grade and couldn’t read. Boys Ranch changed all that.

After graduating from high school, Bill went on to earn degrees from Texas Tech University and West Texas State University (now West Texas A&M University). He returned to the ranch as a teacher and staff assistant in the 1970s and served in the Texas Senate (1981-1989) and in the U.S. House of Representatives (1989-1995). His brothers grew up to become Baptist preachers. Now retired from the ministry, one works for Bell Helicopter and the other is a professional photographer.

Their story is echoed by Tom Novak, campus administrator for Boys Ranch. Tom and his four brothers moved to the

ranch after getting into a little trouble back home in El Paso. He was nine at the time. “We weren’t bad kids, but we were on our way to getting there,” he says. All five graduated from Boys Ranch High School and went on to attend college and have successful careers. Tom returned to the ranch in 1980 and has been working there ever since. He plans to stay “forever—Lord willing and the creek don’t rise.”

The ranch does not keep statistics on how many people visit annually, but the number is “in the many thousands,” says Ken Adams, director of public relations. Tour buses visit—mostly in the summer—and individuals as well. Visitors can tour one of the residences, the chapel, and the barns; see a film about the



life of Cal Farley; and even eat lunch with the kids. But, by far, most tourists are drawn by the site’s Old West history, says Ken.

A gentle ford on the Canadian River first attracted sheepherders to this area in 1876. Cattle ranchers soon followed, and less than a decade after its founding,



Art teacher Geneva Priddy painted this scene of a bronc rider, one of several murals that adorn the horse barn. Below, Amber cleans her horse’s hooves before an evening ride.

The 11,000-acre ranch is a self-supporting community with its own livestock and fire department.

Tascosa was booming. When Oldham County was organized in 1880, Tascosa became the county seat.

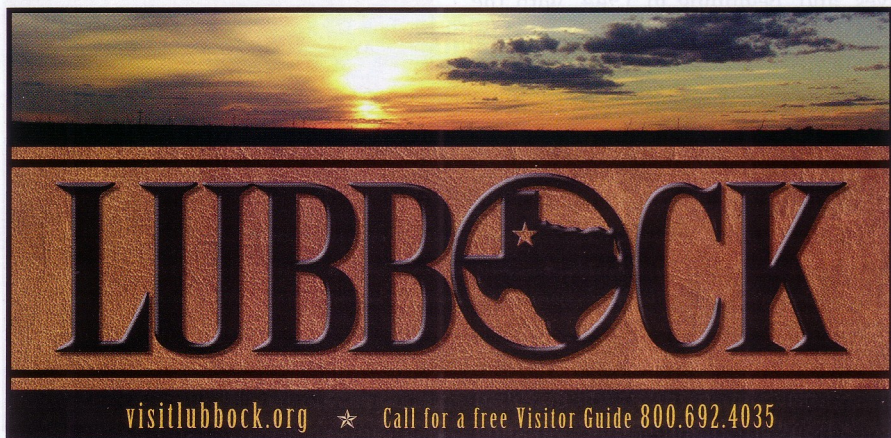
The courthouse, the first home for Farley’s boys, is now the Julian Bivins Museum—Bill Sarpalius’ favorite spot on the

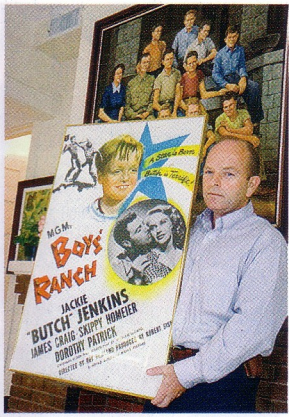
ranch. A self-described “history nut,” he loved guiding tours through the place when he lived here. It’s a not-to-be-missed stop, thanks to an eclectic mix of memorabilia that spans centuries, including artifacts from Native American and prehistoric Panhandle cultures, one of the largest barbed-wire

collections in the world, other cowboy and pioneer items, and photos and documents related to Boys Ranch history.

Boot Hill Cemetery, another must-see spot, harkens back to the Old West. Among the graveyard’s first permanent residents was Fred Leigh, foreman of the LS Ranch, who, while drunk, shot the head off a duck—much to the dismay of the bird’s owner (and, one presumes, the duck). Rather than pay up when the sheriff confronted him, Fred reached for his gun and got a fatal blast of buckshot for his trouble. In 1886, he got four new neighbors, all at once, after three cowboys and the owner of a dining establishment died during a five-minute shootout.

Not everyone buried at Boot Hill died in a gunfight, though. Two infants there died of smallpox, and one poor fellow perished when thrown from a horse. Spartan white crosses surround a state





Assistant administrator Mike Pacino (left) displays a poster for the 1946 film *Boys' Ranch*. Wooden crosses in Boot Hill Cemetery (right) stand as stark reminders of the area's Wild West history.

historical marker inscribed: "Along with law-abiding and God-fearing men and women [sic] were buried here, often without benefit of clergy, men who 'died with their boots on.'" The original headstones have been lost to vandals and thieves.

In 1887, a local newspaper headline boasted "Seven Saloons. We Boom." But that same year, the railroad bypassed Tascosa, triggering a slow decline. In 1915, when the county seat moved to Vega, Tascosa was left with nothing but its past glories and one feisty resident, Elizabeth "Frenchy" McCormick, who refused to move (see *Speaking of Texas*, page 11). She died in 1941. Some 20 years

later, Boys Ranch residents erected headstones for Frenchy and her Irish husband, Mickey, and still tend the graves.

For all its fascinating past, though, Cal Farley's Boys Ranch is really about the future—the future of people like Robert and Callie.

Asked what people should know about Boys Ranch, Robert, a man of few words, paused a moment and gathered his thoughts.

"Well," he said, "I like it."

Maine freelance journalist and kayaking instructor MELINDA RICE writes the Lone Star Heroines series of historical novels for children. She also wrote the *Speaking of Texas* item on Frenchy McCormick.

BOYS RANCH ANNUAL EVENTS

The 62nd annual Cal Farley's Boys Ranch Rodeo will take place Sep. 2-3. Cost: \$5 general admission, \$8 box seats. All tickets include a barbecue meal at noon; the student rodeo begins at 2:30 p.m. each day and lasts about 2 hours. Events include barrel-racing, pole-bending, calf- and bull-riding, breakaway roping, and (for younger riders) mutton-bustin' (sheep-riding) and stick-horse barrel-racing. For ticket information, contact the ranch (see page 61).



The 7th annual Old Tascosa Rendezvous also takes place Sep. 2-3, in conjunction with the rodeo. Hours: Sat-Sun 9-2:30. Admission: Free. Visitors can experience the rough and rugged times of Old Tascosa, thanks to historical reenactors, who set up primitive campsites and tipis typical of the 1800s and demonstrate skills such as fire-making, black-powder shooting, hide-tanning, beading, and campfire-cooking. For infor-

Russell, shown on page 60, won the silver belt buckle above at the 2004 Boys Ranch Rodeo.

mation about setting up a camp and details about both the rodeo and the Rendezvous, contact the ranch.

Boys Ranch hosts the Youth Cowboy Poetry & Music Gathering each Father's Day weekend (June 14-17, 2007). In addition to cowboy-poetry and music performances by both youth and adults (last year's lineup included Red Steagall and other well-known performers), activities include tours of the Ranch, a Western art and trade show, a family dance, a cattle drive, a celebrity team-roping event, chuck-wagon meals, and a Sunday-morning chapel service. Cost: Fri-Sun afternoon entertainment is free. Evening shows \$15, \$10 age 18 and younger; dance tickets \$10, \$5 age 18 and younger. A 3-day package costs \$45, \$30 age 18 and younger. (All activities except the dance are free for participants age 18 and younger.) For ticket information and updates, go to www.youthcowboypoetry.org, or contact the ranch.

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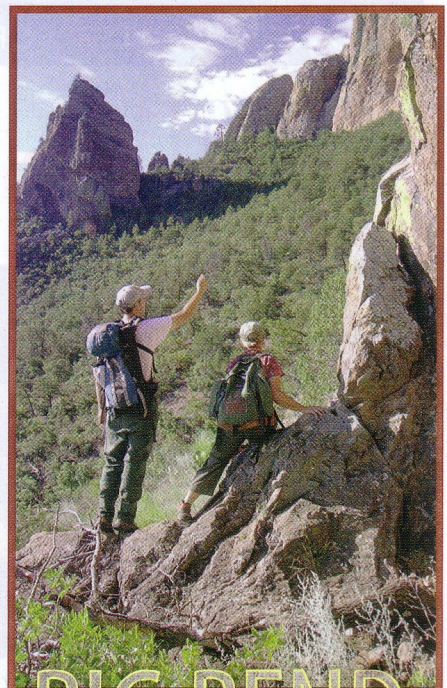


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