

Homestead Heritage combines farming, arts and a bit of tourism

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ELM MOTT, Texas – The seasons are changing, and temperatures are dropping. Cedar scents the air and the clop of the horse's feet is slow and even. It's a short hayride to the bluff overlooking the farm fields.

Thick trees mark the line of the Brazos River. It's quiet – no traffic rumbling, no airplanes – just birds catching the breeze to glide along.

Homestead Heritage farm and traditional crafts village can seem like a return to the past. Really, it's a demonstration of a simplified present.

About 30 families belonging to a nondenominational Christian church farm 500 acres just north of Waco. Other church members, about 600 total, live nearby and help with the work. Part of the produce goes straight to their tables. Most goes to support the group's businesses, a cluster of shops on the farm's edge.

Clay from the riverbank is turned into hand-thrown pottery. Wheat is harvested, milled and becomes bread and pastries in the deli. Sorghum becomes syrup to sell. Tomatoes are made into salsa. Wax from honeycombs become candles.

For visitors, it's a chance to watch as the crafts are made and then buy the fruits of the farmers' labors.

The workshops are on gravel paths set among the trees. All were handmade by Heritage members. Several are restorations of buildings moved from elsewhere. The flour mill, still being finished, was built around 1750 in New Jersey. The church moved it to Texas in pieces and is reassembling them. It's operational, but the water wheel won't be completed until about Thanksgiving.

The group is so adept at quality construction that it built President Bush's house in nearby Crawford.

The showplace for the crafts is the Barn. A restored farm building of wooden planks and stone, it has everything from handmade furniture to herb-scented soap, candles and books on raising chickens and ducks.

On display is perhaps the most beautiful rocking chair you'll ever see. (And at \$6,000, one of the most expensive.) The slats forming the back are amber with dark streaks. The tag says it's solid curly maple, but it seems impossible that anything that smooth and polished was ever part of a tree. The seat is leather. Admirers approach it carefully and sit gingerly. Then they relax into it and don't want to get up.

Upstairs is a handmade guitar. A handmade wooden canoe gleams from a banister.

These were made in the woodworking shop about 50 yards from the Barn. Master craftsman use hand tools and traditional methods to make the furniture. They'll gladly explain their method and talk wood.

What crafts you see depends on what day you're there and what's being made. Even on a slow day, there are plenty of people to answer questions. One woman quickly left the sales desk to answer questions about a loom, even though the shop was busy.

The busy times are during the Labor Day Sorghum Festival and the much larger Thanksgiving Festival, the three days after the holiday. Special exhibits and booths are set up to handle the thousands of visitors who browse through the trees.

Almost every day, Jenni Fritzlan, 23, throws clay pots. Sometimes she produces small jars so alike they could have been made by machine. Other time is spent on original items, such as a five-gallon water jar.

Adults, children, even teens watch absorbed as she expertly uses her hands to shape a small urn. Within minutes, she has turned out several of the pots. At long tables nearby, several girls work on their own pots, more slowly and with less grace. Jenni started that way when she was 10.

It's that opportunity to give their children time to learn a craft that is a primary reason for Homestead Heritage.

"We try to help our young people find their gift and their calling," said Paul Sellers, a woodworker from Great Britain who lives on the farm. He designed the rocking chair for sale in the Barn, but younger men trained in the farm's woodworking shop now produce it.

Their calling could be farming, construction or cooking. But it could also be accounting, administration or graphic arts, Mr. Sellers said. "We need those, too."

The church members moved to the farm about 16 years ago, searching for a more meaningful life. "We came to the point that we wanted to simplify our lives in some way," Mr. Sellers said. "A lot of times we want to separate our work from our lives."

But work should be a part of life, Mr. Sellers explains. Relationships should form around work. The group uses horses to farm, not because members disdain tractors but because it allows relationships to build among the farmers.

"With a tractor, one man could farm the land. But with horses it takes six or eight. They work together and build a relationship," Mr. Sellers said.

The Robertson family from Houston has visited Homestead Heritage several times, drawn by that feeling of relationships.

"It's just a fun place to visit. My father actually made syrup from sorghum, so this has some meaning for us," said Dave Robertson. He and his son, Patrick, watched Ms. Fritzlan throw pots at the Labor Day Sorghum Festival.

During the festival, a horse circled the press, providing the force to squeeze the liquid from sorghum grown on the farm. It runs underground through a pipe about 50 feet into a 10-foot-long rectangular

metal cooking vat. Young women, their long hair done up in complicated buns covered with cotton scarves, chat as they use long scoops to skim foam off the syrup. When it thickens, it drains into a bottling shed. During the festival, you can get fresh syrup drizzled on warm cornbread. The cornbread is made from corn grown and ground on the farm.

After you've watched flour being milled, chatted with the blacksmith, learned about the uses of the herb yarrow and visited the model homestead, it's lunchtime.

Some people make the drive to the farm just for the food. The deli serves sandwiches and pastries made with wheat grown on the farm. There's homemade ice cream for dessert. (The sorghum pecan flavor is different and delicious.)

End a visit with the hayride. Often a young boy will drive the draft horses while his father answers questions about the farm. Then hop down and take in the view from the bluff overlooking the river. Listen to the quiet and breathe in the scent. It's a good day.

Karel Holloway is a freelance writer in Terrell.

When you go

HOURS, GETTING THERE

Homestead Heritage traditional crafts village is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Admission is free.

Take Interstate 35 south to FM 308 (Elm Mott) exit. Go west on 308 for three miles, then north on FM 933. Drive 1½ miles, then go west on Halbert Lane. The farm is a quarter-mile straight ahead at 608 Dry Creek Road.

CONTACT

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www.homesteadheritage.com.**

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