



ALLYCE'S ATTIC

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As we sat around a picnic table one beautiful, starry night, eating homemade chili, singing Gospel songs, blending harmonies with a gifted group of musicians, half a dozen cowboys rode up on horseback to join us and one of my Bandera buddies said, "This truly is 'Fantasy Island,' isn't it?"

I wrote that twelve years ago for Texas Rising Star, a now defunct magazine, but it might have been yesterday. Music jam sessions, singing gospel as an impromptu congregation, cowboys (and cowgirls) on horseback are still integral to the Bandera experience, contributing to the time-out-of-place atmosphere that draws tourists, journalists, TV and film production companies from all over the world. Bandera is very real, but it's the "fantasy" that brings people here and encourages them to return again and again.

How many times have we heard the question, "Are you a real cowboy?" If I'm feeling sassy, I respond, "What's your definition?" I once compared Bandera to Peter Pan's Neverland and wrote, "Our Pan wears a western hat and boots and dances a mean two-step." Little boys (and girls) who don't want to grow up are another reason for Bandera's popularity, and thank heaven for all those Winter Texans and tourists, not to mention locals, who ascribe to Toby Keith's lyrics advising them "Should've Been A Cowboy."

Fancy yourself the next Dolly Parton, Taylor Swift, or one of the Georges – Jones or Strait? C'mon to any one of the jam sessions in town. Be prepared, however, to keep up with some accomplished musicians. Bandera music is world renown, and so are its honky tonks. Last week, I met folks from England, Germany and Italy. All of

them tried out the dance floor. One German visitor taught himself to play steel guitar and formed his own band in Germany. He plays in on jams when he and his wife are in town.

Traveling from one venue to another one night, my son observed, "This is like being back in college." Then he added his own comparative. "It's like Disney's Pleasure Island."

Mr. Roarke's Fantasy Island often had a be-careful-what-you-wish-for turn, Peter Pan's Neverland had the dastardly Captain Hook, bar hopping college towns can trip up the best of us and Pinocchio's Pleasure Island turned the naughty kids into asses.

Bandera, too.

It's far from perfect and critics love to Bandera-bash about everything from government to barroom shenanigans to bikers replacing cowboys. Irrelevant when you see that look come into a Winter Texan's eye or a little boy or girl wearing their first pair of cowboy boots and the inevitable question follows in near reverential tones. "Are you a real cowboy?"

Twelve years after I wrote the opening paragraph, we spent Easter Sunday morning at John and Lanette Pennell's, singing gospel, sharing the Easter message and a sumptuous potluck brunch with friends.

Eileen Thoemke, a winter Texan from Minnesota, summed it up. "How very special this little town in Texas is," she wrote, and then added, "Keep dancing." Yes, ma'am.

