

TEXAS - musical drama will be a highlight of your trip to Palo Duro Canyon!

by Keith Bridwell

If you're searching for a rugged outdoor experience within a day's drive of Bridgeport, you aren't likely to get more rugged than Palo Duro Canyon State Park in the Texas Panhandle.

The park is home to almost 29,000 acres of wilderness land, punctuated only by a few miles of paved roads, horse stables, campgrounds and the beginning of the Red River. It is located about 14 miles east of Canyon and 23 miles south-east of Amarillo.

Referred to as "The Grand Canyon of Texas," Palo Duro was formed by waters from the divergence of the Tierra Blanca Creek and the Prairie Dog Town fork of the Red River. Over the years, their waters and an omnipresent wind have carved Palo Duro into a 120-mile long, 20-mile wide, 850-foot-deep canyon that stretches from near Amarillo to near Silverton in the low rolling plains.

The bulk of the park land was purchased from private owners in 1933, and shortly thereafter - in 1934 - Palo Duro Canyon State Park was born.

2009 is the 75th anniversary of the park, and to help celebrate, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department waived entrance fees over the July 4 weekend.

Man is known to have frequented the canyon for more than 12,000 years because of its abundant water, wildlife and protection from the elements.

The Clovis and Folsom Indians first resided in the canyon and hunted large herds of mammoth and giant bison. Later, other cultures such as the Apaches, Comanches and Kiowas utilized the canyon's resources and protection.

Wild turkey, white tail and mule deer, barbary sheep, coyotes, cottontail rabbits, roadrunners and western diamond-back rattlesnakes are regular visitors to the canyon.

In 1874, Palo Duro Canyon was a Red River Wars battle site. Col. Ranald Mackenzie, under orders from the U.S. Government, captured many Indians who were living in the canyon - after first capturing or killing 1,400 of their horses. With no remaining way to escape, the Indians surrendered and were transported to reservations in Oklahoma.

Shortly thereafter, much of the canyon belonged to the famed J.A. Ranch and was operated by Col. Charles

Goodnight.

Canoncita Ranch was purchased from private owners in 2002 to add more than 2,000 acres to Palo Duro. Then the Fortress Cliffs Ranch was purchased by a consortium of entities - including the Parks and Wildlife Department - to add another 2,900 acres.

Palo Duro is translated from the Spanish language as "hard wood" - taken from the abundance of mesquite and juniper in the area.

From the park's acquisition in 1933 until 1937, six companies of young men and military veterans were sent to Palo Duro Canyon to develop roads, along with the visitor center, several cabins, shelters, and the park headquarters.

Those cabins, by the way, have been renovated and are available for rent. Beware, however, that you will need to bring everything you will use, including bed linens and towels!

Entrance fee to the park is \$5 per adult, and children are admitted free. For park information, telephone 806-488-2227.

If you want an "up close and personal" visit with the canyon, do it the old-fashioned way - on horseback. The Old West Stables are located inside the canyon and offer guided tours to Timber Creek Canyon and the famed Lighthouse formation (which is also visible from only one location along the paved road).

The Stables also offers wagon rides, campfire breakfasts, souvenirs and a snack bar.

Palo Duro Canyon is located on the southern high plains, an area called El Llano Estacado, or the "staked plains."

Dating back 250 million years, the oldest layers of rock - Cloud Chief Gypsum - can only be seen in a few areas of the canyon. The next oldest and most prominent layer of rock is the Quartermaster Formation, which can be seen with its distinctive red claystone/sandstone and white layers of gypsum.

The Tecovas Formation is located directly above the Quartermaster and is composed of yellow, gray and lavender mudstone and sandstone. Together, they form the colorful triangular slopes called Spanish Skirts.

If you want to take your travel trailer or motor home, facilities are available near the



Live performances by a troupe of more than 60 actors, singers and dancers grace the amphitheatre stage inside Palo Duro Canyon. Set changes take place every few minutes of the show, which runs through August 15. - Indexfotos

canyon rim which offer 50-amp electric hook-ups, water, clean restrooms and showers. Pets and tents are allowed, and pull-thru sites are available for big rigs.

A highlight of your trip to the canyon will be a visit to the Palo Duro Pioneer Amphitheatre to sit through a performance of the live play, "TEXAS," which is in its 44th year of production.

The Amarillo Chamber of Commerce calls it "the most spectacular outdoor musical drama in the world," and it is good!

A cast of more than 60 actors, singers and dancers (more than 40 of them wired for sound), take the stage which the Amarillo Chamber says "millions of fans from all around the world have come to see."

If you have ventured to that part of the state before, you will know that West Texans dance to the beat of a different drummer, so prepare to be spoiled! They will tend to your every need.

The show's characters bring to life the stories, struggles and triumphs of the Panhandle settlers of the 1800s.

The Pioneer Amphitheatre will seat almost 2,000 people, and we know that from Saturday night's performance on July 4 - it was their best-attended-ever show, with 1,936 paid guests (some of whom were seated on the "infield grass"!).

And if you're willing to get to the amphitheatre a bit early, you may want to enjoy a steak dinner, cooked by the folks at the world-famous Big Texan Steak Ranch.

Not all of the action takes place on the stage, either. Riders are up and down the trail most of the evening, with little lighting. A lone horseman, carrying the flag of the Great State of Texas, appears atop a 600-foot cliff, signalling the beginning of the show.

A nighttime lightning show on the face of the canyon adds realism to the production.

The amphitheatre is located in a natural basin in the can-

yon, where numerous amenities have been added in recent years, including new seating and a sound and lighting facility which is spectacular and functional.

Backstage tours can be arranged to get a behind-the-scenes look at the set.

To add more pizzazz to the weekend, Texas-born music legend Boz Scaggs and his band performed in Pioneer Amphitheatre on Sunday.

The 2009 performance of "TEXAS" began on June 5 and will run through August 15. For ticket information, you are encouraged to telephone 806-655-2181.

To reach Palo Duro from Amarillo, take Interstate 27 south to exit 110 (U.S. 87), then continue south for three miles into Canyon. Turn left (east) on 4th Avenue (Texas 217), then travel 14 miles to the canyon.



The whittling may not have been there, but the spitting was! "Uncle Henry" was the star of the show during the performance of "TEXAS", and carried the musical drama from start to finish.



Fireworks are a part of every performance of "TEXAS," but Saturday night's July 4 show was spectacular!



YOU COUNT 'EM, but almost 50 actors, singers and dancers were on stage for this part of the musical drama "TEXAS" inside Palo Duro Canyon.



Fire - natural and man-made - played a big part in the story of the settlement of the Texas Panhandle, and is used to add realism. (Notice the actor running across the right side of the stage in flames!)



1,936 paid attendance on Saturday night, July 4, set an all-time record inside the amphitheatre.