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FIND IT: Wildcatter Ranch, 6062 Hwy. 16 S., Graham, (888) 462-9277 wildcatterranch.com

Wild West

Rediscover Texas at Wildcatter Ranch

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

AH, TEXAS. FOR CITY-DWELLING TRANSPLANTS—and underexposed natives—the charms of rustic life in the Lone Star State can be easily forgotten. But there are cures for such geographical amnesia. Sitting in a wooden rocker on your log cabin's patio; watching the setting sun streak a vast sky lavender and orange; feeling the breeze that carries a chorus of coyotes' calls over the treetops—Wildcatter Ranch offers such reminders of wide-open Texas.

Just 90 minutes northwest of Fort Worth, near Graham ("home of America's largest downtown square"), Wildcatter is the kind of place where you go for a weekend and plot ways to stay permanently. The 1,500-acre ranch offers trail rides, hiking, archery and skeet shooting. To recover, there is Sage, the on-site spa, and to replenish, the Wildcatter Steakhouse.

A ranch dog might drop by if you leave your cabin door open; the carriage horses corralled near the 16-room hotel will whinny in appreciation if you give them apple slices. Big Boy and his fellow longhorns will nibble pellets out of your hand.

"We have senior citizens who come through, and we put 'em on that wagon and take 'em down to see the longhorns," says owner/manager Anne Street Skipper, "and they giggle and laugh because they haven't been in a wagon since they were kids."

Skipper grew up in Graham and is the great-granddaughter of Col. Edwin S. Graham, who co-founded the town. She was living in Fort Worth, looking to retire in Graham, when the Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau director mentioned the area needed "a place to go and get your hands dirty."

Hoping to share childhood memories of unlocked doors and s'mores at night, Skipper and her brother bought land by Edwin's old property. They opened the steakhouse in 2005 and added cabins and a Victorian-inspired hotel in the next three years.

The upscale cabin suites are the way to go. Each has a



theme; mine was "Famous Chiefs." In addition to historical photos and a massive headdress over the stone fireplace, it had a tepee bed that was so enticing, I had to climb right in. That historical component—and the oil derricks you hear at night—helps set Wildcatter apart from other guest ranches, says Skipper.

"Some people say The West began in Fort Worth, but it happened in Young County," she says. Its history has been dramatized in books and films, including *Lonesome Dove* and *The Sons of Katie Elder*. Much earlier history reveals itself in the rocky land. Fossil hunts are among myriad kid-friendly activities.

There's more to explore in Graham. It's filled with quirky shops, an art gallery in a former church and the historic National Theater. Several proprietors share Skipper's experience: They grew up in Graham and left, only to be lured back by its charms.

Consider this a friendly warning: Once you visit, that magnetic pull might draw you back, too. 🐾