

THE PREMIER MAGAZINE OF THE WEST

COWBOYS & INDIANS

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VIGGO MORTENSEN

*LORD OF THE RINGS
TO HIDALGO*

- FASHION FINDS — FRESH LOOKS FOR 2004
- DENNIS QUAID ON THE SET OF *THE ALAMO*
- SADDLE UP AT 3 SCENIC GUEST RANCHES
- ROY ROGERS AND TRIGGER REMEMBERED

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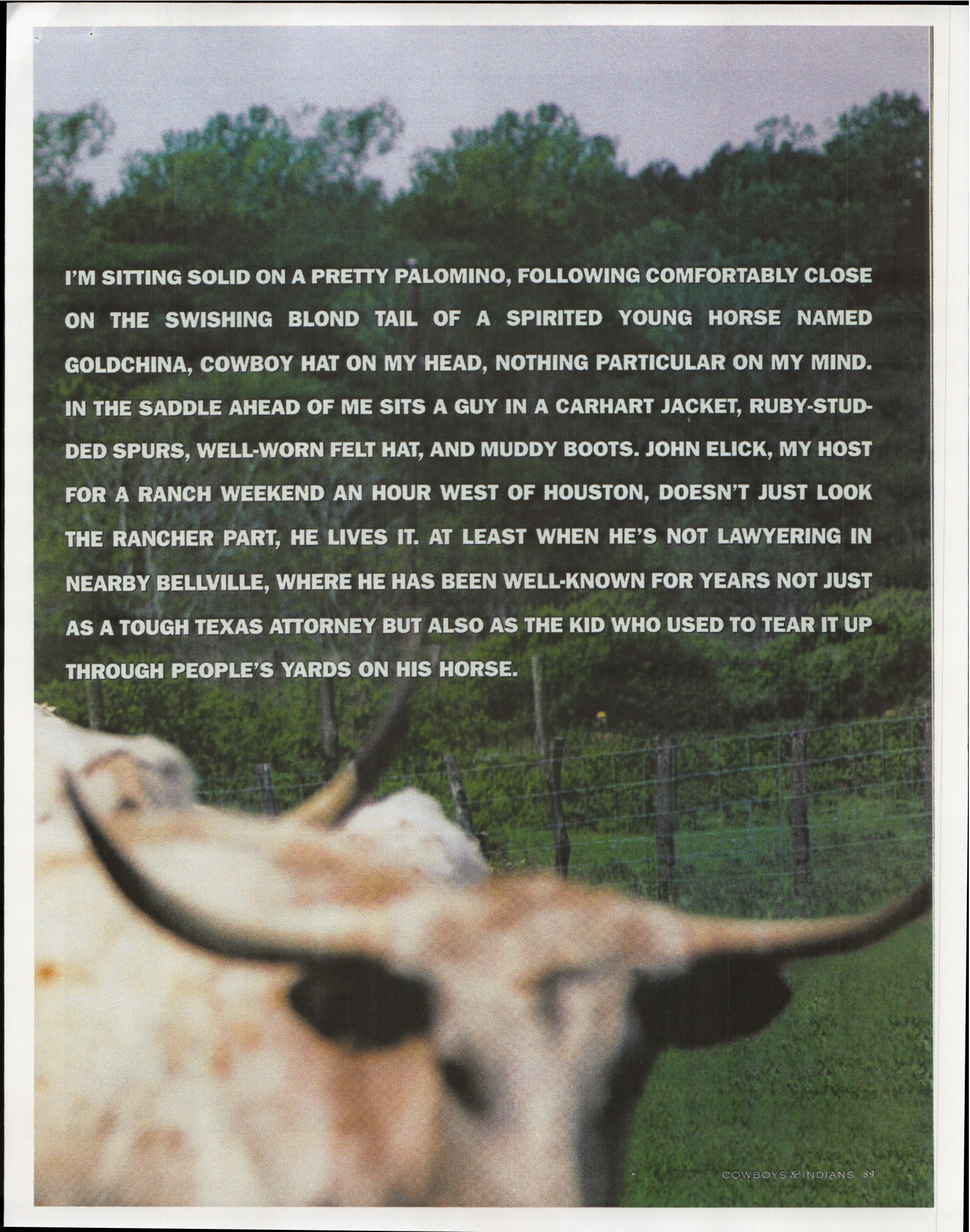


Something Worth Saving

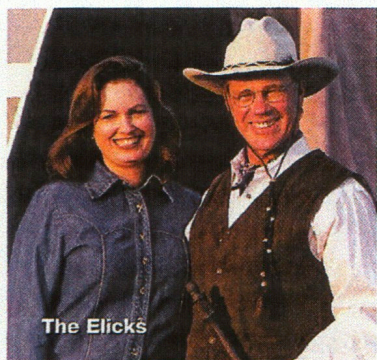
Welcome to Texas Ranch Life,
where the Elicks preserve the past and protect the future, Texas-style.

by Dana Joseph

*photography by
Herbert Pickworth*

A photograph of a longhorn cow in a field with trees in the background. The cow is in the foreground, slightly out of focus, with its long, curved horns prominent. The background shows a green field with a wire fence and a dense line of trees under a clear sky.

I'M SITTING SOLID ON A PRETTY PALOMINO, FOLLOWING COMFORTABLY CLOSE ON THE SWISHING BLOND TAIL OF A SPIRITED YOUNG HORSE NAMED GOLDCHINA, COWBOY HAT ON MY HEAD, NOTHING PARTICULAR ON MY MIND. IN THE SADDLE AHEAD OF ME SITS A GUY IN A CARHART JACKET, RUBY-STUDDED SPURS, WELL-WORN FELT HAT, AND MUDDY BOOTS. JOHN ELICK, MY HOST FOR A RANCH WEEKEND AN HOUR WEST OF HOUSTON, DOESN'T JUST LOOK THE RANCHER PART, HE LIVES IT. AT LEAST WHEN HE'S NOT LAWYERING IN NEARBY BELLVILLE, WHERE HE HAS BEEN WELL-KNOWN FOR YEARS NOT JUST AS A TOUGH TEXAS ATTORNEY BUT ALSO AS THE KID WHO USED TO TEAR IT UP THROUGH PEOPLE'S YARDS ON HIS HORSE.



The Elicks

In the early autumn of his years, Elick's not slowing down: Now he's thinking about cutting-horse competition. I can see from how he sits a horse — the way he's completely steady and looks like a cocky teenager when Goldchina makes a move he says would have thrown almost anyone

else off — that he likely hasn't gotten over his 15-year stint as a bronc rider. He's still hell-bent for leather, but it's a different Elick who's taking me on horseback through the gently rolling 1,800-acre Lonesome Pine Ranch, where he and his wife Taunia welcome guests to Texas Ranch Life, a working-ranch experience and a way of life they are committed to saving.

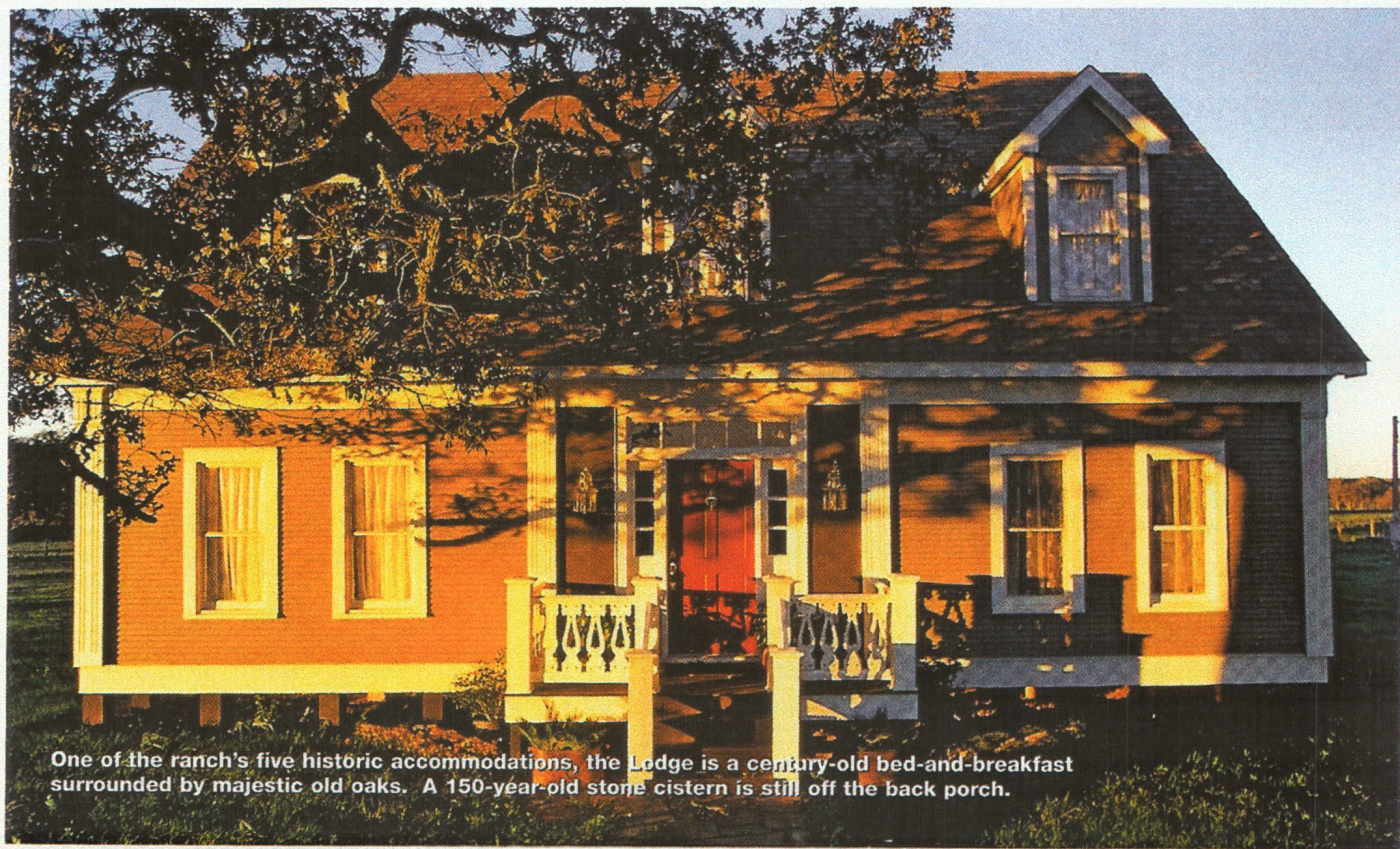
In between musing about an upcoming trip to ride *charro* in Mexico and throwing around some Spanish to season our ride with a dash of *ranchero*, Elick takes on the role of nature guide. One minute he's pointing out how the pastures he's restoring to their native prairie grasses are doing. The next minute he's calling my attention to a dead grasshopper a "butcherbird" has impaled on a stalk for good eatin' on a future flyby.

Among other things, the guy's a serious wildlife and land conservationist. Not the tree-hugging kind — the what's-good-for-the-ecosystem-is-good-for-me-and-my-ranch kind. A sort of macho nature lover who, with Taunia, has pieced together parcels

of land over the years to come up with thousands of acres devoted to restoring and preserving the land, the habitat, and the Texas ranching tradition.

Their complementary obsessions make the ranch go 'round — he, the land and the animals, she, the houses and the hospitality. Some of Taunia's other incarnations are attorney, MBA student, mother of three daughters, historian, and preservationist. She's got a regional reputation for rescuing obscure local history and stray historic houses the way some women rescue cats. Whenever a building in nearby Industry or Bleiberville is scheduled to be demolished, folks give her a call. She just moved a country church up near ranch headquarters and has yet to move the Knolle-Ripple House — another "near-divorce" house in the making if there ever was one. See the finished 1869 House, the century-old Lodge, the 1940s bungalow cabin, the 1880s Texas dogtrot Lakehouse, and the 1850s Confederate house and compare them with the old church she hasn't really started on yet and you start to understand the kind of love and dedication — and money — required to take decay and disrepair to Frommer's Five-Star.

If Taunia's passion for saving historic properties sometimes brings the couple to the brink, John's got a couple of fixations of his own. To hear Taunia tell it — which she does with a don't-get-me-started roll of her pretty eyes — he's over the top when it comes to his "stockers." Elick gets calves newly weaned when they're sickly and not doing well, and, like the struggling land he turns around, gets them thriving. Not really all that different from what his wife does with the dilapidated historic homes she



One of the ranch's five historic accommodations, the Lodge is a century-old bed-and-breakfast surrounded by majestic old oaks. A 150-year-old stone cistern is still off the back porch.

sinks heart, soul, and considerable cash into.

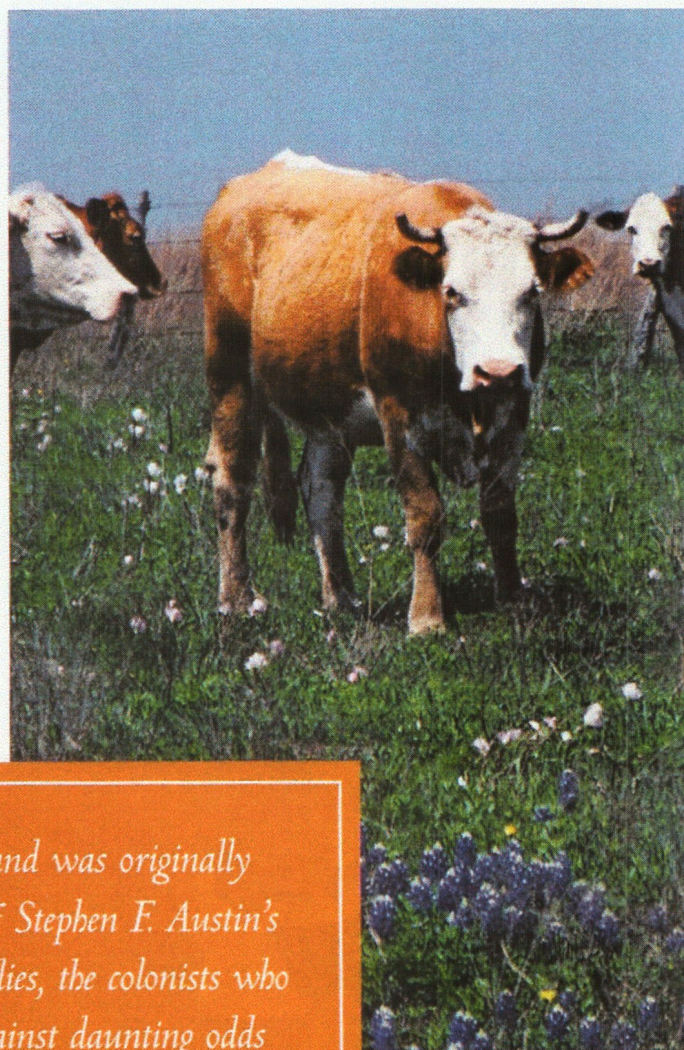
You sense that Taunia's talent for bringing things back to life also applies to the people who come to stay at Texas Ranch Life. "Did you know," she asks, "that psychologists have found that viewing green landscapes has a profound impact on both your mental and physical health?" She'll tell you that the ideal view is a pastoral landscape of grassland, scattered trees, and a glimpse of water. The truth to this has been borne out during my quick stay. And what of the personal side of environmental psychology? Taunia never met a stranger. Her fast friendship and the warm, welcoming atmosphere she creates can turn around a straggling spirit as much as the healing landscape.

Healing — that's what I'm feeling now as we ride. "Look at this grass," Elick says over his shoulder as we crest a hill near the stoic pine that gives the ranch its name. Winter's coming on, so the Austin County landscape is all earthy shades of blond, taupe, red, gray, and brown, waving in the Texas wind, an ocean of graceful grass. "This land was bare to the dirt from past overgrazing," Elick says. "In a couple years, it will be knee-high." As if to accentuate the importance and success of his healing effort, my horse, Pal, stops for a couple of munches.

Bringing back the native grasses invites back other native species. You can already spy bald eagles on the Elicks' ranches. And they're trying to coax the endangered Attwater's prairie chicken back. "I want to bring back the natural habitat so that not just the Attwater's prairie chicken but also the coyotes, skunks, wild turkeys, grouse, fox, deer, hawks, and other animals are at home here again," Elick says. "I work the land in a traditional way so that that can happen. I want people to be able to see the frontier the way it was."

This part of the country has frontier legacy written all over it — often in blood. It's storied soil and hallowed ground for any true Texan. The acres within the Elicks' miles of fence aren't far from Washington on the Brazos, where in March of 1836 the Republic of Texas declared its independence from Mexico. Elick can point out a spot where, in 1830, 14 fathers and sons fought fiercely with 40 Waco Indians. Taunia can show you the part of the San Bernard River where an alligator made off with a sleeping slave girl, taking off her arm before she could be rescued. Adjacent to the ranch, you can visit the burial ground of some San Jacinto war veterans.

It's hard-won ground. This very land was originally settled by one of Stephen F. Austin's "old 300" families, the colonists who stuck it out against daunting odds and got their pick of some great, if unforgiving, land for their courage and trouble. As if on cue, we ride by a broken old marble headstone. "Some of the old



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German settlers," Elick tells me, leading me around the toppled marker and through a pecan bottom, identifying plants and trees as we go.

Pal feels so natural under this saddle. He's a good ol'

boy — connecting with him and with the land makes me glad that I opted to ride instead of sitting near the lake with my biography of John Adams. You could definitely just hole up here, keep to yourself, relax, and be happy as a clam in your luxuriously appointed, faithfully restored surroundings. Or you could go full-tilt like a bunch of HP-Compaq employees from Norway, who kicked off a corporate summit by helping Elick drive cattle across the ranch, then castrating and branding them.

Or you could be like me and my posse: hang out with the Elicks and get the real feel of ranch life. Load bags and bags of feed into the pickup at the feed store ("Nuthin' wrong with your back," Elick says). Grab a burger ("best in town"), crawfish pie, or chicken dinner at George's Quick Stop. Buy ribs, steaks, turkey jerky, and rat-trap cheese at the butcher. Tour Taunia's historic houses and find out how you take layers and layers of paint down

TEXAS RANCH LIFE

The peace and quiet of the Texas outdoors and the excitement of a working cattle ranch jingle your spurs? Then mosey over to Texas Ranch Life, the guest ranch of John and Taunia Elick. It boasts a five-star Frommer's B&B rating and plenty of five-star fun.

ENJOY. Horseback riding, cattle roundups, fishing (11 lakes, some up to 13 acres), hunting, birding, antiques, split-rail and picket fences lined with heirloom roses, and scenic views of rolling ranchland and native pecan bottoms. There's a mechanical bull in the arena, willing bass in the lakes, great food on the table, and super sheets on the beds.

Saturday, May 1, 2004, is the second annual Heritage Gathering in nearby Bellville [(979) 865-3407; bellvillechamber@sbcglobal.net; www.bellville.com], featuring food, vintage exhibits and demonstrations, music, cowboy



poets, storytellers, hayrides, games, tours, the 20th annual Market Days on the Square, and the Texas Ranch Life long-horn cattle drive through town. Just think, you could be one of the cowhands bringin' 'em in.

STAY. On Texas Ranch Life's Lonesome Pine Ranch, you can bed down at one of five beautifully restored amenity-laden historic homes: the 1869 House, a two-bedroom, two-bath early Texas jewel; the Lodge, a century-old home surrounded by majestic old oaks with two suites downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs; the Cabin, a cozy 1940s one-bedroom bungalow; the Lakehouse, a two-bedroom Texas dogtrot favored by honeymooners; and the Confederate House, a graceful four-bedroom house surrounded by huge native pecans. There's also the Hacienda, a contemporary Tex-Mex two-story with plenty of room for family gatherings. There's a nice place for your horse(s) to stay. No matter where you roost, there are cattle, bass, and bison nearby.

GO. Texas Ranch Life is an hour west of Houston and an hour and a half southeast of Austin, between Chappell Hill and Bellville, off of Texas Highway 290. Call or check Texas Ranch Life on the Web for exact directions and rates.

REMEMBER. Texas Ranch Life, P.O. Box 803, Bellville, Texas 77418-0803. Phone: toll free (866) TEXASRL. Online: www.texasranchlife.com. E-mail: taunia@aol.com.

to the original ochre and turquoise. Sit on a split-rail fence with a blade of grass in your teeth and the sunset in your eyes. Take a quick, perfectly distilled lesson in horsemanship in the arena. Drink really good tequila around the chuckwagon fire while Elick grills dinner and tells stories. Bow heads and pray as family and friends over dinner. Flip over Taunia's homemade coleslaw, fresh rolls, and sweet peaches. Get dizzy picking out crystal clear constellations ("Oh, the stars at night are big and bright, deep in the heart of ..."). Sleep like royalty in Neiman Marcus bedding. Pig out again in the morning when town doctor Don Bosse tries out his gourmet brunch on ranch guests. Learn to lasso the wooden steer. Check out Pancho Villa's saddle in the back bedroom. Con the spurs right off your host's boots. Hear "Home on the Range" on the Bose at ranch headquarters and really listen to — no, *feel* — that song for the first time.

That's the heart of Texas Ranch Life and the feeling I've got right now. Really living.

My trail ride with Elick is about to end and we haven't yet achieved the goal of our mission. Though he has ostensibly taken me out on horseback for my entertainment, more important to Elick is finding a loner black calf he hasn't seen for a couple of weeks. The stocker was one of the sickly ones, and though Elick doesn't betray any maudlin emotion, it's plain he's worried about the little guy. We cross a dry creek bed, pushing away branches, going toward a spot he has a hunch about.

Suddenly in a little clearing, a black shape appears. Alive. But is he well? We come around to get a better look. Elick's relieved. "He looks good," Elick says. And the little black calf almost seems to give us a nod in agreement. He stares calmly back at us with a look that to a human on horseback could only say one thing: "Everything's all right."

In that moment, I know what I'll take away from this ranch weekend: the look of that loner calf, the passion of loner Elick, the warmth of gregarious Taunia, the beauty of the unpretentious countryside, the gift of the open spaces.

When we say goodbye, Taunia will be hiding something for me under her black cowboy hat. "We don't have a cowboy hat for you," she'll say. "But we do have these." And she will present me with a beat-up pair of spurs. Elick will put them on my boots immediately. "He never takes his off — not even for church," Taunia will say. "But don't wear them when you're driving," she'll add. "It's dangerous and it tears up the floor of the car."

Those spurs will come to mean a lot to me. Their jingle will always remind me that one of the secrets of a well-lived life is devoting yourself to something worth saving.

