

Texas Oil Country's



by Tony Banning

Texas' Permian Basin boasts three major claims to fame: the largest oil field in the contiguous United States, the nation's most celebrated high school football team—Odessa's Permian Panthers—and the Midland home where presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush lived long before politics beckoned. It is also the site of some very unexpected travel treasures—attractions every Anglophile, theater lover or history buff will want to see.

The presence of oil underscores most facets of life here—including an intriguing bit of sandhill incongruity: the presence of a downright decent representation of Shakespeare's Globe Theater on the campus of Odessa College. The Globe of the Great Southwest, billed as the world's most authentic replica of the Bard's 1598 playhouse when it opened more than 40 years ago, is slightly less than bona fide. Concessions to patron comfort come in the form of cushioned seating, excellent acoustics, air conditioning and indoor plumbing. It was the life work of Odessa high school English teacher

Marjorie Morris, a woman adept at obtaining funds from the local oil barons. In an all-American display of grit and determination, she spent 20 years raising money and wrote a master's thesis about Shakespeare during the process.

The 450-seat theater she rallied her neighbors to build serves the community from February through November with a full and varied playbill. This year's lineup includes (but is not limited to) the opera *Car-men* opening February 26, the spoof *I Hate Hamlet* playing in spring and an annual Shakespeare Festival that brings professional actors to the Globe's stage every September.

Next to the octagonal-shaped theater a library devoted to the playwright is part of The Anne Hathaway House, a replica of Shakespeare's wife's home. It also includes a small performance space and meeting rooms.

Visitors in the mood for another brush with English icons need look no further than The University of Texas' Permian campus, where a representation of Stonehenge looms. Constructed in just six weeks from local limestone, it

Quirky, Quixotic Attractions



The almost-authentic Stonehenge replica, located at the University of Texas Permian Basin, is as wide as the original but not as tall.

captures the essence if not the exact dimensions of the original. While the width is spot on, the height is 14% shy of the prehistoric monument's height. Created as a tourist attraction, it's a worthy way to spend an afternoon—especially if you have a good imagination or appreciate the fact that no transatlantic travel is required to marvel at this rendition of one of history's mysteries.

The petroleum business brought the Bushes to town more than a half-century ago. The family's home at 1412 West Ohio Street in Midland has been restored and furnished with 1950s period pieces. It opened to the public in 2006 and tells the story of the Bush family's early days in Texas. A self-guided driving tour, available at the Midland Chamber of Commerce, takes visitors on an expedition to homes once inhabited by either or both presidents Bush.

Celebrated sports writer H.G. Blissinger elevated the Permian Panthers to legendary status with *Friday Night Lights*, a chronicle of that high school team's bid for the 1988 Texas State High School Football Championship. His story later became a movie that utilized Odessa's Ratliff Stadium. Now, a TV series of the same name presents a fictional version of the Panthers.

Folks take their high school ball seriously in Texas. Some local hotels offer special autumn packages that include two tickets to a Panthers game. The stadium, one of the largest in the Lone Star State, seats 19,300 people and is home field for both the Panthers and their arch rival Odessa Bronchos.

Every visit to the Midland-Odessa area should include an encounter with history. A variety of options make this easy. The Petroleum Museum helps visitors understand how "black gold" transformed Texas. It includes a thorough explanation of the creation, discovery and processing of oil. Life-size murals, ancient artifacts, antique drilling equipment and colorful memorabilia combine with interactive exhibits for an experience that is as educational as it is entertaining.

For a more cultural experience visit The Museum of the Southwest, housed in the historic and architecturally interesting Turner Mansion. The building serves as further testimony to the affect of petroleum on these parts. In 1934, the Great Depression tortured the national economy. In West Texas, things were different. Independent oil prospector Fred J. Turner, Jr. had just won a Supreme Court case establishing his rights to more than 500 acres of oil-rich land. When his first well began pumping more than 150,000 barrels a day, it became apparent his family could move beyond their two-bedroom bungalow. Turner had an architect design an opulent amalgam of Colonial, Revival, Mediterranean and Tudor styling. Today, the mansion and surrounding park-like grounds serve as a multi-purpose cultural center. Its art museum features a collection emphasizing the art and archeology of the Southwest. It also hosts a broad range of traveling exhibitions. The experiential Children's Museum makes learning fun for the whole family and a Planetarium offers a chance to experience the heavens. ■

STONEHENGE: BILLY HATHORN