

Roll on Ben, Roll On

Ben Wheeler bounces back
with fabulous food, live music,
and really sharp knives

Text and photographs by **Randy Mallory**

(965 words)

NEARLY 20 YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE I LAST VISITED BEN WHEELER,

the tiny town named for a 19th century mail carrier. Back then, I spent a good two hours perusing overalls and ribbon cane syrup at Moore's Store, one of East Texas' disappearing general stores (see *Texas Highways*, November 1992). I hoped the best for the 1933 mercantile, but it closed shortly after my visit, and downtown all but died.

Recently, I heard that Moore's Store had been reincarnated (of all things) as a lively music venue and restaurant. In fact, I was told, all of Ben Wheeler is on a roll. I have to check it out!

From our home in Tyler my wife, Sallie, and I head west on Texas 64, then sidetrack onto the old highway 64, now FM 279. The serpentine backroad winds through the artist community of Edom, past Texas longhorn ranches, and into a Ben Wheeler I hardly recognize. Gone is the boarded-up look of the past. Instead, refurbished wood and brick buildings from the 1930s house shops and eateries in the two-block-long downtown. We park beside a red and yellow mural with a gargantuan freckle-faced boy holding a Moon Pie and Royal Crown cola.

The mural's greeting, "Welcome to Historic Ben Wheeler," sprawls across the brick wall of Scoots 'n Scoops, a combo motorcycle museum and ice cream parlor. The motorcycles belong to a 65-year-old former road racer, entrepreneur and all-around Renaissance man named Brooks Gremmels. In unincorporated Ben Wheeler he's de facto mayor...or dare I say *owner*.

Flush with profits from his oil and gas business, Brooks and wife, Rese, moved from Dallas “back home” to East Texas and began buying up local property three years ago. Some \$3 million later, they had acquired 40 acres in the heart of Ben Wheeler. To secure the town’s revival, they created a foundation that attracts quality artisans by offering \$1 per month rent in nine historic structures already restored or moved in.

“At first we just wanted to turn Moore’s Store into a great place for food and music,” “Mayor” Gremmels tells us while holding court on a bench in front of Moore’s. “The good feelings we got from local folks made me realize that bringing Ben Wheeler back had become my personal calling.”

Sallie and I spend the rest of this bright and sunny Saturday sauntering back and forth across FM 279—careful to watch for the occasional tractor or pickup truck—to witness firsthand a small town revival.

We waltz into Dan Harrison’s knifeshop just as a regular customer recounts a recent Colorado hunting trip. “Yep, and that guide couldn’t believe your hunting knife, Dan. He said it was the sharpest blade he’d ever used!”

“And probably the most beautiful,” I think to myself, having followed Harrison’s career for years. The nationally-respected craftsman takes hardened D-2 tool steel and freehand grinds custom blades for curvaceous kitchen, hunting, and collector knives. He then fits the blades into exotic wood or horn handles. “In 60 years of work, this is my most unusual knife,” he tells us, pulling out an ornate nine-inch blade with a handle fashioned from a Woolly Mammoth tooth. “My wife says that if this goes, she goes too!”

Artistic metalcraft, we decide, is something of a local specialty.

At Flying Fish Gallery, Randy and Sherri Martin transform cast-off metal parts into fantastical creatures. Gears, springs, and rods become a graceful water bird. Rebar, plate

steel, and a sliced bowl become a kinetic fish. Bats hammered from copper sheets spin frenetically in the breeze.

At Rave Art Gallery, Dallas architects Craig and Jan Blackmon put their design talents to sculptural use. I especially like their “pipe balls,” two-foot-diameter globes comprised of tack-welded “noodles” cut from plumbing pipes. A blue light glows from the Blackmons’ heavy pieces, which contrast with the delicate copper and silver necklaces of gallery mate and jeweler, Dyan Johnson.

A stroll away, we find Lonnie Robinson stoking his coal-fired bellows at Wagon Wheel Forge. The affable blacksmith tells stories as he shapes a calla lily for a wall sconce. “He can make anything his mind can conjure,” wife Linda remarks. The Robinsons’ son and apprentice, Jody, is busy working on another piece.

Blacksmith Howard Walker spent 50 years fixing plows and buggies at Ben Wheeler’s other forge, transformed into the Forge Bistro. Walker’s forge and hammer mill stand beside the eatery’s rustic bar, tables, and chairs made from cedar trees cut on the Gremmels’ ranch. There’s no more gumbo, so I pick a scrumptious panini sandwich with grapevine-smoked tenderloin, caramelized onions, and Swiss cheese.

After lunch we browse the vintage furniture and handmade gifts at Antiques and Texas Heritage. Next door, the eclectic boutique, WhimZee, cracks us up with its rubber cowboy boots and high heels for babies.

At Sojourn Gallery we like the representational portraits and landscapes of native Texas painter Mary Hortman. Like some other Ben Wheeler artists, Hortman also hosts classes at her studio and elsewhere.

We end the night boisterously at Moore’s Store listening to the Magills, a rockabilly band from Tyler. A painted mural behind the band depicts a quieter time: Ben Wheeler of the 1930s.

The spacious joint is jammed full. So we sit on the patio underneath a twinkling Sagittarius, my zodiac sign. We split a righteously-rich burger (yes, we love sandwiches) and fresh-cut onion rings, while sipping Shiner bock and chardonnay. We recap what else we heard about today—about the country school and church the Gremmels are restoring downtown, about the Feral Hog Festival held each October in this, the official Wild Hog Capital of Texas, and about other big plans for this little town.

Based on one day's sampling—and one couple's vision—Sallie and I agree that Ben Wheeler is *definitely* on a roll.

Ben Wheeler

Ben Wheeler lies 25 miles west of Tyler on FM 279 (just off TX 64 and five miles south of Interstate 20). For contact information on shops, restaurants, and events, call the Ben Wheeler Arts & Historic District Foundation **903/833.1070**; www.benwheelertx.com.

Overnight lodging is available at **Cross Timber Ranch**, a bed & breakfast and llama farm, 877/833-9002; www.crosstimberranch.com.

Resources:

Interviews with shop owners and Brooks Gremmels; contact them through public relations rep, Veronica Terres, 