Ranch & Retreat: Bandera

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Bandera is one of those places that gets in the blood, passing on a sense of home from generation to generation.

It happened to Clay Conoly, who moved from San Antonio to take over running his family's Dixie Dude Ranch 20 years ago. The ranch had been in his family since 1901.

He says it's the sense of family in Bandera that keeps him there. "It's a family business and a place that provides a lot of joy, so there's a lot of reward in that," he said.

And it happened to Robin "Pearl" Brown and her partner John Gray who moved from San Antonio 11 years ago. Both had fathers who lived in Bandera — in fact the two fathers were playmates as kids — so Bandera was a kind of second home to Brown and Gray throughout their lives.

Brown, who runs a successful clothing and accessories line, Magnolia Pearl, says it would benefit her career to move, but she loves Bandera too much to do so.

"Moving someplace else would definitely feed my bank account, but it wouldn't feed my soul," she said.

(Bob Owen/Express-News)

Bandera is proud of its cowboy heritage and in fact markets itself as the cowboy capital of the world. That heritage is part of what draws people to the area.

So what charms has Bandera used to capture such multigenerational loyalty?

For Conoly, it's the town's deep cowboy culture and history, so steeped that the town markets itself as the cowboy capital of the world.

And for Brown and Gray, they feel something almost mystical about Bandera. "The Medina River and the cottonwood trees are magical," Brown said.

Apparently Bandera is casting its spell on other people, too.

"I'm starting to see a lot more families move to Bandera. People with younger children who want to raise their kids in a safer area," Brown said. "It's becoming more eclectic now. It used to be all about cowboys. Now there are more artists."

Conoly has noticed a shift in the town, as well. "It's very evident in that when I go to a restaurant or a saloon, I see a lot of unfamiliar faces. Some are tourists, and some relocated because it's a great place to live," he said.

Besides the cowboy mystique, part of the draw is the relative affordability of the land compared to Hill Country hot spots like Fredericksburg or Boerne. Still, though, the land is appreciating at a steady rate.

In 1996, the median price per acre in Bandera County was $2,043. In 2006, that price had jumped to $7,086 per acre, an appreciation of more than $500 per year, per acre.

Babo Teich, broker/owner of Teich Properties says that only about 15 percent of her buyers are wannabe cowboys.

(Photo courtesy of Jon King Keisling)
According to locals, the slower pace of life and step back in time is a big draw for Bandera. â€˜It's an amazing place,â€™ says resident Robin â€˜Pearlâ€™ Brown.

Some come to the Hill Country with ideas of starting a cattle ranch only to find it takes thousands of acres to make a profit in that business and that Bandera's land tracts have been reduced to only hundreds of acres. So these buyers usually settle for smaller parcels that they lease out to cattle owners, allowing the landowner to use the agricultural exemption tax break.

Others with the ranching itch want to buy a couple hundred acres and start a hunting ranch. But the majority of Teich's clients are looking for a getaway and investment. They're looking for rolling hills, Hill Country views and water.

(Rod Davis/Express-News)
The Medina River is a huge draw for Bandera. Property that fronts this attractiion can command upwards of $20,000 an acre.

The Medina River makes for prized waterfront that comes at a premium. According to Shawn Morrison, owner/broker of Cross Texas Real Estate in Bandera, basic Medina riverfront property without improvements can command $20,000 an acre. The price goes up with utilities and houses.

For example, one of Morrison's listings on Texas 16 North, five miles west of Bandera, is listed at $1.6 million. The property has 32 acres with more than 1,100 feet of cypress-lined Medina riverfront. Plus it has a 3,700-square-foot main house, a guesthouse, a metal barn, two fields, four horse stalls, a well and a 3,000-gallon storage tank.

"River property is a higher premium. Buyers like the movement of the water. Ponds and lakes are nice, but (buyers) really love the feel and sound of flowing water," Morrison said.

Brown's father had wanted to move back to Bandera, but died before Brown and Gray could move there with him. Still, they decided to relocate as it was her father's wish and Gray still had family — including his father — living in Bandera. So, they found a place in the town.

One day, their dog Humphrey went missing and while driving around, knocking on doors, Brown and Gray came to a vacant property that would change their lives.

"Immediately, John and I knew we were going to live there," Brown recalls. Then one day much later, an investment broker they had contacted for retirement advice told them about a ranch she had that she no longer wanted.

It was the same property. "She said God told me you are supposed to live at this ranch. It was a dream come true," Brown recalls.

That was in 2000, and the 40-acre property in terrible disrepair was theirs for $225,000. After years of work and DIY spirit, the couple have restored the home and guesthouses, planted their gardens and done such a good job that their property has been featured several times in Country Living as well as in Country Lifestyle, Home Companion and more.

No wonder Brown says they're in no hurry to leave.

"The trees, the river, the birds in the sky — it's an amazing place."

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