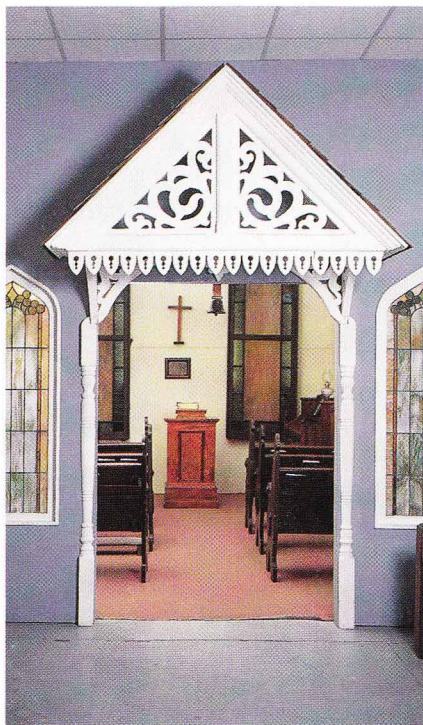


much more. The museum is housed in a handsome Spanish-style building dating from 1929, a former auto dealership. Its galleries are spacious and spotless. There's even a tiny, quaint wedding chapel that couples can rent for a wedding with a short list of attendees.

The XIT Ranch, whose 3 million acres made it the largest fenced ranch in the world, has its origins in a land deal engineered by the State of Texas in the 1870s to finance the building of the state capitol. A Chicago syndicate accepted the land as payment for the construction work and then ran cattle on it until they could sell it at a profit; the last parcel was finally sold in 1963. The museum tells this story in a series of cases filled with compelling artifacts, including the hide of a steer branded with the XIT brand and a second hide autographed by former XIT cowboys at a 1936 reunion (one signed it in a shaky, old man's hand, "Billie Jarrett 1889"). The centerpiece of this exhibit is an 8x10-foot model of the XIT's Buffalo Springs headquarters.

But there is also a natural history gallery that features an enormous stuffed snowy owl with outspread wings and a frightening mountain lion killed 10 miles north of town in 1985, as well as a fascinating collection of skeletons of local fauna. Beyond that is a transportation collection that includes a three-seated surrey used in Springer, New Mexico, and a Jungster II airplane built by a local man, an ex-World War II pilot, in the 1970s. Another gallery is dominated by a Star windmill with a 10-foot wooden wheel and includes photographs from the Texas A&M University archives of rural women at work. One photo shows a woman in Grand Prairie contemplating a cabinet filled with 850 jars of preserves she has just put up.

The museum has an active program of bringing in traveling exhibits. Every small-town museum has to have eccentric exhibits, and



The wedding chapel at the XIT Museum.

the XIT Museum fills this requirement with a collection of 800 miniature elephants and a map of the United States made out of postage stamps.

The museum's archives include 150,000 negatives dating to the 1920s from two Dalhart photo studios, as well as business records from local ranches. The XIT Museum is operated by the Dallam-Hartley Counties Historical Association.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

BAR-H STEAKHOUSE, 1010 Hwy. 54 East, (806) 244-3813. Western-style atmosphere. Grilled steaks, fish, chicken and burgers. Weekly noon buffet, 32-item salad bar, homemade soup.

EXTREME CUISINE, 416 Denrock Ave., (806) 244-3287. Menu changes daily and features a mix of Asian, French, Hungarian, Spanish and/or American fare, which always includes burgers, steaks, sandwiches and soups. "You never know what to expect," says chef/owner Billy Thorne.

BEST WESTERN NURSANICKEL MOTEL, 102 Scott St., (806) 244-5637. Free continental

breakfast. Microwaves and refrigerators in most rooms. Outdoor pool. **HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS**, 801 Liberal St., (806) 249-1145. Free continental breakfast. Rooms include microwave, refrigerator and VCR. Fitness center and indoor pool.

SAN ANGELO MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

SAN ANGELO

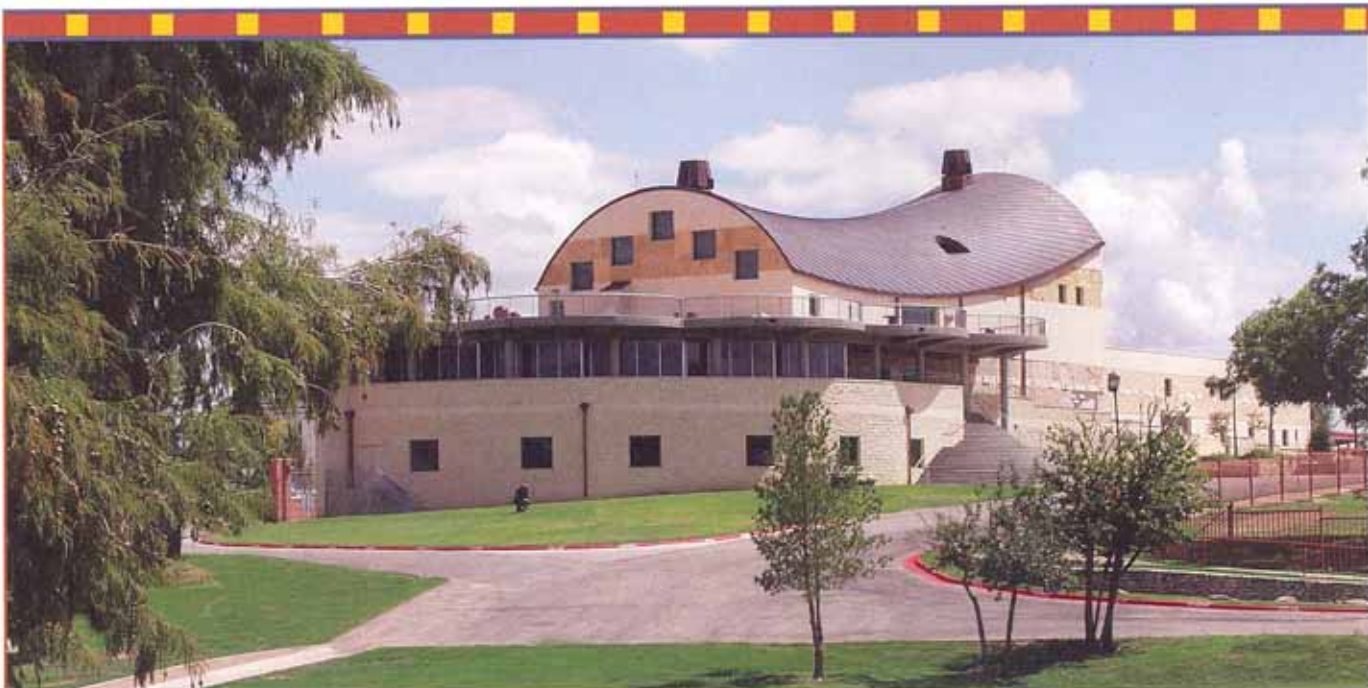
SAN ANGELO MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ONE LOVE ST., SAN ANGELO. (325) 653-3333, SAMFA.ORG. TUESDAYS-SATURDAYS, 10 TO 4; SUNDAYS, 1 TO 4. ADMISSION \$2 FOR ADULTS; \$1 FOR CHILDREN AND SENIOR CITIZENS; FREE FOR MILITARY. AREA SERVED BY CONCHO VALLEY EC.

THE FIRST THING YOU'LL NOTICE when you arrive at the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts (SAMFA) is the unique shape of the building. The concave sweep of the copper-clad roof has been described as resembling a saddle or a Conestoga covered wagon, and has sparked commentary from art critics and architectural publications since its opening in 1985.

Inside you'll find a collection that belies the remote West Texas location and the size of San Angelo, population 89,000, a four-hour drive from San Antonio, the nearest metropolitan area. The museum has three galleries, a large rooftop sculpture terrace, a research library and education wing, and a meeting room for 300. The Children's Art Museum sits two blocks away at the historic Cactus Hotel.

SAMFA was originally housed (beginning in 1985) in the Quartermaster Storehouse of Fort Concho National Historic Landmark. In 1994, fundraising began to build a new site on the Concho River opposite downtown. The campaign was so successful that donations exceeded the \$6.5 million goal by \$700,000. The new building opened in 1999.

The National Ceramic Competition, started at the museum in 1986,



The architecture of the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts is said to resemble a Conestoga wagon.

has been called the "premier clay show in America" by *Ceramics Monthly*. Due to its growing size and popularity, the competition is held each April of even-numbered years.

The museum has received prestigious national honors for its community service, bringing to life its tenet of "not just art on the walls, but art in our lives." SAMFA charges only a nominal membership fee to keep the museum accessible to all, hosts large-scale free public events for families, and lends artwork to outlying towns. A strong emphasis is placed on outreach programs including the Boys & Girls Club, mentally retarded adults through the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, children's summer art programs, "Art as a Third Language" for students learning English as a second language, and in-service training for teachers.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

ENRIQUE'S RESTAURANT & CANTINA, 34 W. Avenue D, (325) 653-8222. Located at the Plaza, just a short stroll from Fort Concho National Historic Landmark. Serving Mexican food for more than 30 years.

ZENTNER'S DAUGHTER STEAKHOUSE, 1901 Knickerbocker, (325) 949-2821. Great steaks plus chicken-fried steaks, crab, shrimp, catfish and burgers.

INN AT THE ART CENTER B&B, 2503 Martin Luther King, (325) 658-3333 or 1-866-557-5337. Three guest quarters nestled among artisans' studios at the Chicken Farm Art Center. Private entrances and baths. Breakfast included.

SAN ANGELO STATE PARK, northwest of San Angelo, off FM 2288, (325) 949-4757. Six enclosed, air-conditioned and heated mini-cabins. Facilities for tent and RV camping.

MUSEUMS OF PORT ISABEL

PORT ISABEL

MUSEUMS OF PORT ISABEL, 317 E. RAILROAD AVE., PORT ISABEL. (956) 943-7602, PORTISABELMUSEUMS.COM.
LIGHTHOUSE: 9 TO 5 DAILY. MUSEUMS: TUESDAYS-SATURDAYS, 10 TO 4. THREE-SITE ADMISSION \$7; \$5 SENIORS. SINGLE SITE: \$3, \$2. AREA SERVED BY MAGIC VALLEY EC.

COMBINE SUNKEN TREASURE SHIPS, cannonballs and swords from a nearby international battlefield, and the only Texas lighthouse open to the public, and you have the Museums of Port Isabel. The three small facilities, all new or renovated in recent years, spotlight the ships and people who transformed the southernmost corner of Texas.

Heavy with silver from Mexico's

mines, three Spanish ships sank in a storm north of Port Isabel in 1554. Those ships, and the recovery of a wreck in 1967, are featured in the Treasures of the Gulf Museum. A large backlit image of a storm-tossed galleon with sails billowing sets the stage for the artifacts—water casks, sailors' hammocks and cannons. Reach into 16 small cubbies to identify items found on sailing ships—rope, leather, (fool's) gold. In the Children's Discovery Lab, kids jump at the chance to try on a Spanish-style helmet and buckler, along with reproductions of aprons, bonnets and jackets from the 1500s.

Next door, a roof-to-sidewalk fish mural (painted by a fisherman in 1906) identifies the Port Isabel Historical Museum, once a 19th-century general store. Inside, the museum focuses on the village of El Fronton de Santa Isabel, founded in 1839 and thrust into the limelight in 1846 when General Zachary Taylor established Fort Polk here. The first battle of the Mexican-American War was fought nearby. Palo Alto battlefield debris—buckles, musket balls, powder flasks—fill the upper floor, along with displays of spurs, flintlock rifles, cannon balls, wool uniforms and well-illustrated exhibits of Mexican and American army camp life.

Downstairs, visitors journey