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Hill Country

Magazine

**Dance Halls:
Two-Stepping
Across Texas**

**Big Bend:
Where the Desert
Meets the Sky**

Uptown Blanco

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TWO-STEPPING ACROSS TEXAS

BY PHIL HOUSEAL

Those who come to the Texas Hill Country from some less-blessed location may not understand the phenomenon of a real Texas dance hall. Sure, other parts of the country have places to dance—nightclubs, ballrooms, or repurposed roller rinks.

But the folks who settled Texas had the foresight to build halls designed for dancing.

Actually, the original halls were multi-purpose and multi-ethnic, according to Stephen Dean, co-Founder of Texas Dance Hall Preservation Inc.

As waves of European settlers arrived in Texas, they tended to settle into their own distinct communities.

"It seemed that a German or Czech family would stop and establish a settlement," Dean said.

"About 20 miles up the trail—a day's ride by horse—there would be another settlement. They built their communities around culture halls, like farmer halls, shooting clubs, gymnasiums, turnvereins, or insurance fraternities. The main emphasis was to keep their culture alive."

In addition to the dance floor, many halls included nine-pin bowling alley, domino and card room, and a bar.

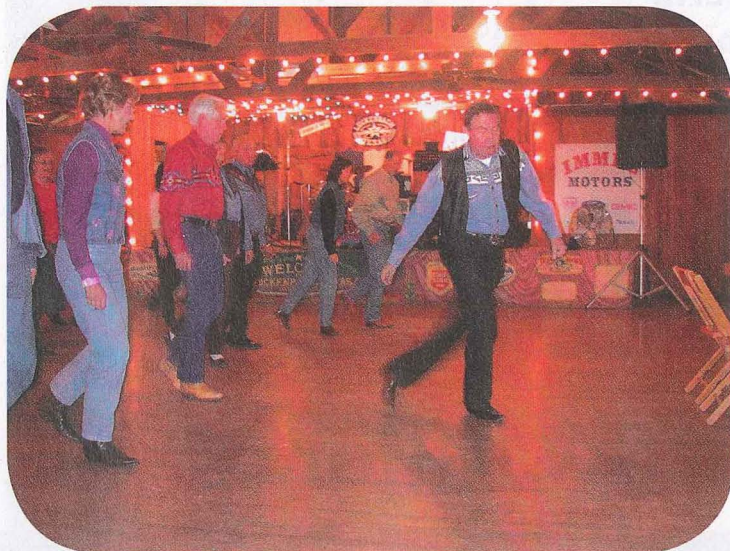
Dean is one of the leading figures in the drive to chronicle the story of the dance hall and keep the culture—and the buildings—alive. The musician and former club owner is not sure how many halls remain standing—he has only visited 800 so far.

"I say '800' loosely," he explained. "There are a lot of different kinds of halls. Some were Legion halls that have been taken over by dancers on Saturday night; some might be tin buildings. But as far as historic turn-of-the-century halls like Gruene Hall, I would venture to say not even 20% are like that."

The story of dance halls has two parts—the buildings themselves, and the culture they preserved and passed down. That cultural heritage is still alive in the few halls still operating, such as Turner Hall in Fredericksburg.

One of Fredericksburg's oldest organizations, going back to March, 1871, the Fredericksburg Social Turn Verein still

"New" Texans learn the basics of the two-step and the waltz on the boards of Luckenbach Dance Hall.



GRUENE HALL

Along with the Broken Spoke in Austin and Luckenbach Dance Hall, Gruene Hall may be the best example of a genu-

ine Texas Dance Hall that has made the transition to modern business model.

In fact it claims to have been in continuous operation since it was built in 1878. Perched on the banks of the Guadalupe River, the Hall has prospered with the growth of the town of Gruene into a tourist attraction for tubers, shoppers, and diners from the IH-35 corridor. It still hosts local bands as well as George Strait, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard.

HISTORIC FUN AWAITS IN GRUENE

BY ALLAN C. KIMBALL

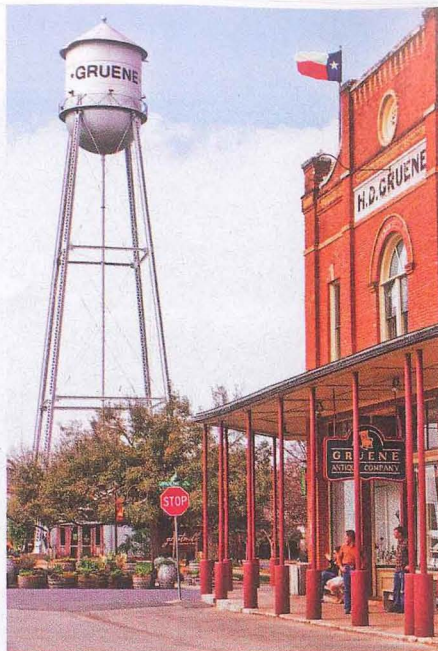
First thing you need to know about Gruene is how to pronounce it: Green. The second thing you need to know about Gruene is that it's fun.

No matter what your definition of fun is, you are going to find it in Gruene, that little historic district near New Braunfels.

Do you have fun shopping? Gruene has many distinctive shops, like H.D. Gruene's Antique Company or the Gruene General Store. Roam around. In the shops too numerous to mention, you'll discover handmade pottery, outdoor clothing, books, CDs and several walls full of T-shirts, antiques, boutique apparel, candles, sculptures, paintings, handcrafted jewelry, fossils, unusual socks, furniture, toys, Fickle Pickles, pecans, and one wall chock full of candy.

Always wanted to have fun in the Old West? Check out the Smiling Eyes Photo Gallery where you can get Western-themed portraits made.

Want to have fun in the sun? Jump into



Iconic street scene in Gruene. Gruene Historic District photo.

the adjacent Guadalupe River and float downstream in a canoe, kayak, raft or tube. You'll find several liveries nearby that will rent you watercraft if you don't have your own and will provide shuttle service. The Guad, as it's known around here, is one of the top river recreation destinations in all of Texas.

And, hey, speaking of river fun, the Guad is the southern-most trout stream in the country.

Have fun eating a meal at the Gristmill, a rustic old cotton gin overlooking the river. Since 1977, it serves up some of the best food in the Hill Country. Other restaurants in town offer Mexican food, burgers, homemade soups, and fruit smoothies.



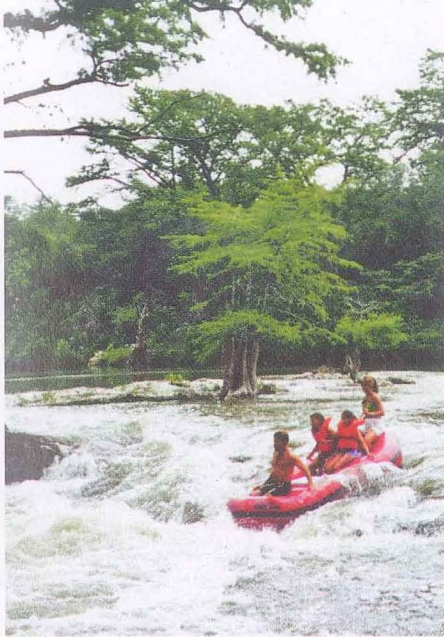
Ron and Isabell Kocher, visitors from Pennsylvania, check out the hundreds of items for sale at the Gruene General Store. Photo by Madonna Kimball.

Is wine your fun thing? The Grapevine offers a variety of wines. Taste several without charge. They do beer, too.

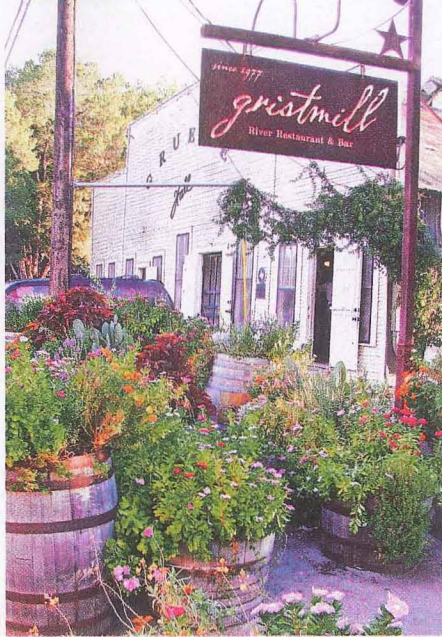
Perhaps your idea of fun is listening to fine music. Then Gruene Hall, the oldest honky-tonk in Texas is just the place. The downhome venue, built in 1878, features top musicians like Ray Wylie Hubbard, Jerry Jeff Walker, Charlie Robison, Karen Abrahams, Pat Green, Bret Graham.

Looking for the fun of a night's stay in an elegant bed and breakfast? Stay a night or two at the Gruene Mansion Inn, formerly H.D. Gruene's home, carriage house, and corn crib.

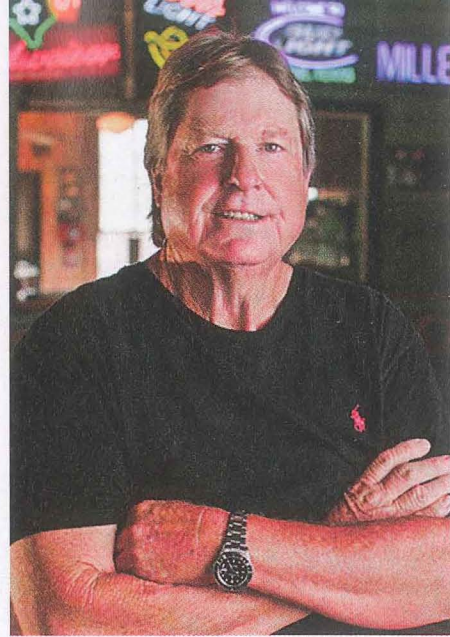
Who was this H.D. Gruene?



Floating the Guadalupe River near Gruene, whether by raft, canoe, kayak, or inner tube, is one of the top summer recreational activities in Texas. Photo by Allan C. Kimball.



The Grist Mill, an old cotton gin in Gruene, offers up great food, great service, great views, and great ambiance. Photo by Allan C. Kimball.



Pat Molak. Photo © Pat Hall

Henry D. Gruene was the son of one of the first German immigrants to come to New Braunfels and raised cotton on the land around his home. The cotton fields attracted others to the area and Henry began building houses, including the town's first store, now the Gruene General Store. He also built that cotton gin.

The Depression and boll weevils caused the family business to go under, the village nearly disappeared, but that dance hall kept on serving beer and booking musicians.

Then, in 1975, along came Pat Molak.

"I was literally looking for a dance hall," Pat recalls. "I made an offer on another one and thank God they didn't take it. A buddy of mine told me about this old one in New Braunfels. The dance hall was just sitting there and being run as a bar with storage in the back. It was a good joint."

He made repairs and returned the storage area to a dance hall. A friend bought the Gruene Mansion and turned it into a bed and breakfast. With the help of his friend Mary Jane Nalley, Pat worked to preserve the authentic, turn-of-the-century look and feel of Gruene by purchasing and repairing several of the town's most notable structures and transforming them into thriving businesses.

Gruene was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and many of the buildings that were rescued by Molak and Nalley have been awarded a Texas medallion from the Texas Historical Commission.

Soon the Gristmill was theirs, then several other properties. Before long, Gruene was recognized by the Texas travel indus-

try as a premiere attraction for visitors. Why?

"The river is a big attraction," Pat notes, adding that an aggressive Chamber of Commerce also helped. "And we're literally a mile off Interstate 35, about halfway between Austin and San Antonio, right on the edge of the Hill Country. We've been lucky enough to have good folks help us and we've had good neighbors. And then there's our music. After 40 years, that dance hall is great. Musicians love that joint."

Gruene Hall is literally the heart of Gruene, Pat says. It helps that they can book nationally-known musicians so the line-up changes all the time.

Even though the area surrounding Gruene has grown, adding shops, restaurants, and other businesses in recent years, and even though the village gets very crowded some times, the historic district hasn't changed much at all.

"You can still feel Gruene," Pat says. "It still has the same vibe sitting on a bench at the antique store. You're a mile off the freeway but you're stepping back in time. It's still kind of fun."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.gruenetexas.com

www.gruenemansioninn.com



OLD GRUENE

MARKET DAYS

Deep in the **ART** of Gruene.

Third Weekend of Every Month*

100 artisans featuring handmade items in Gruene Historic District. Free parking and admission, live entertainment, specialty shopping and dining.

**No market in January. First weekend in December.*

GrueneMarketDays.com | Gruene Historic District