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Discover the other Abilene

By **SOPHIA DEMBLING**
Special Contributor

Abilene doesn't have much of a reputation for anything but oil. In four years in the early 1950s, more than 900 oil fields were discovered within a 75-mile radius of Abilene. Today, Abilene's annual oil and gas revenues are nearly \$600 million and the city has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state.

What does that mean to you?

Well, all that money allows the town to put on an awfully good show for visitors, especially families. Abilenians are civic-minded, arts-minded and generous about funding attractions that can

GETAWAY

What to do in Abilene, 81

easily provide a weekend's worth of hands-on fun. A pleasant three-hour drive from Dallas takes you to a snazzy high-tech museum about West Texas history; an evocative historic village with structures dating from 1875; a three-story art, history and children's museum; an impressive and highly regarded center for children's art; a pretty downtown; and more. Abilene's oil has fueled quite a little renaissance for the West Texas town.



Abilene Convention & Visitors Bureau

The National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature is one of many family attractions.

An Abilene agenda



Steve Butman Photography

Artifacts and high-tech presentations track the state's history at Frontier Texas! in Abilene.

Just three hours from Dallas on Interstate 20, the West Texas town of Abilene has developed as a surprising family getaway. Dallas writer Sophia Dembling covers the highlights.



High-tech cowboys welcome visitors to the frontier

Opened in April 2004, Frontier Texas! is built on what once was a scrap yard in a particularly unfortunate location: It was the first thing visitors saw as they exited Interstate 20 for downtown Abilene. Local adman, artist and visionary H.C. Zachry came up with the idea for Frontier Texas!, and businesses, historians, government officials and individuals rallied to transform the scrap yard into a visitors center and high-tech museum.

Housed in a native limestone building designed to reflect the architecture of Texas' frontier forts, Frontier Texas! is not the standard, bone-dry history exhibit. Instead, it teaches the region's history from 1780 to 1880 through whiz-bang technology.

Your stroll through history starts in a circular theater, where audio-visual guide Buck Taylor (who played Newly O'Brien in *Gunslinger*) introduces you to the "spirit guides" (also depicted by accomplished actors) you'll meet in the museum, including explorer Pedro Vial; buffalo hunter J. Wright Mooar; Cynthia Ann Parker, who was captured by the Comanches as a child and lived among them for 25 years; and freed slave Britt Johnson.

"A lot of people comment on the racial diversity. That came naturally because we wanted to tell the stories of all the different people in the area," says museum executive director Jeff Salmon.

(Even in the museum restrooms, recorded voices murmur words in English, Comanche and Spanish.)

The rest of the museum is everything a kid could love: noise (sound effects include a stampede, a rattlesnake and an Indian attack), computer touch screens, gross stuff such as a community toothbrush, which, a sign informs us, "might be hung at stage stops, boarding houses and other public places," and three genuine scalps, whose former owners the museum is still trying to identify.

The scalps and a buffalo rifle, documented to have slain 20,000 buffalo, are the only bona fide artifacts in the museum, but the big kick is the team of spirit guides who tell their stories via "spectral imagery" (animated 3-D images that are nothing but light). Have your kids snap a flash photo and see how the figure vanishes.

The last stop is another circular theater, where technology and storytelling bring the past to vivid life. (Sensitive children may find the wolf and Indian attacks in this presentation a little intense.)

From the museum, you exit into a large and well-stocked visitors' center for the region, where you can find information to help you explore some of the areas you just learned about.

Frontier Texas!, 624 N. First St.; 325-437-2800; www.frontiertexas.com. Hours: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.



Steve Butman Photography

In addition to seeing works by famous artists, visitors to the National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature can create their own art.

Children's books come to life at the 'Nickel'

When it's time to get interactive, move on to the National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature, which displays original artworks by children's book illustrators. Though it has no permanent collection, the NCCIL (locally called the "Nickel") attracts the best of the best illustrators to its airy and inviting gallery.

"Most of our illustrators are Caldecott winners," says executive director Laura Moore. From now through September, the center is showing renderings by David Macaulay, author of the classic *The Way Things Work* as well as *Castle, City: A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* and many others. The center's shows also travel to other museums.

But just as Frontier Texas! isn't the standard historical museum, the "Nickel" isn't an ordinary art

museum. Here, the emphasis is as much on making art as viewing it.

"The focus here is to help children realize what they can do," Ms. Moore says. "Picture books are their first exposure to art. Sometimes kids are amazed that somebody actually drew that. It's interesting to see children make the connection."

After a stroll through the gallery, settle into the cheery art studio to let the kids get artistic. OK, you can, too.

"Even the adults are having fun," Gloria Stinson, 7, said during a recent visit with Girl Scout Troop 126 from Big Spring. Indeed, troop escorts were happily cutting and pasting alongside their charges.

Via video, the artists will help with projects.

"When we open an exhibit, the illustrators come to Abilene," Ms. Moore explains. "There's a free gal-

lery talk and a children's event where he or she sits down with the kids and shows them how to do their art." (Paper pop-up artist Robert Sabuda drew hundreds to his demo.) These demonstrations are videotaped and stored in the art studio along with the supplies necessary for each project. Pop a videotape in the VCR, find the art supplies bin marked with the illustrator's name, and follow along.

You can do this any time the center is open, but from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays, an art instructor also is on hand to lead activities. And, amazingly, it's all free. "We write a lot of grants and have generous donors," Ms. Moore says.

National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature, North First and Cedar streets; 325-673-4586; www.nccil.org. Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.



SOPHIA DEMBLING/Special Contributor

A 1925 gas station was moved to Buffalo Gap village from a town near Abilene.

Step back into small-town Texas at Buffalo Gap Historic Village

The easygoing history lesson continues at Buffalo Gap Historic Village in nearby Buffalo Gap, a collection of authentic structures dating from 1875 to 1926.

"We pick up where Frontier Texas! leaves off," says Don Frazier, McMurry University history professor and executive director of the Grady McWhiney Research Foundation, which established the village. Dr. Frazier, who studied under Dr. McWhiney in graduate school, explains, "We're taking what's described as an activist approach to history. McWhiney said history is really too important to leave to historians."

Buffalo Gap, a town of about 460, was the first Taylor County seat. The collection about the location of the original settlement includes the original Taylor County courthouse and jail, a Nazarene church, a barbershop, a wagon barn filled with

sundry artifacts, a two-room schoolhouse from 1930 and more. Look for the old Dr. Pepper sign on the outside of the 1925 gas station, which originally was in Winters, about 40 miles from Abilene.

"A few years ago, an old guy stopped by and asked if he could freshen up the Dr. Pepper sign," Dr. Frazier says. "It turned out to be the original one in its original location."

The man was allowed to do the restoration. The gift shop also has a historical theme, both in the items it sells, including an extensive selection of history books, and its location in an authentic 1890s general store and a 1910 baggage depot for the Texas and Pacific Railway at Clyde, Texas.

Buffalo Gap Historic Village, 133 N. William St., Buffalo Gap; 325-572-3365; www.buffalogap.com. Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.

Art, history, a zoo and even more

■ The Grace Museum, housed in what once was the circa-1910 Grace Hotel, devotes one floor to Texas history and a top floor to kids. Even if you choose to just pass through the more adult-friendly art and history exhibits, be sure to stop at the Notes on the first floor, an installation by Edward Weiss that makes music and other sounds when you touch its wooden pieces. Upstairs, the Children's Museum has lots of places for kids to get hands-on and make a happy racket, including a replica of a television news set, where they can sit behind the anchor desk or report the weather while a camera watches.

The Grace Museum, 102 Cypress St.; 325-673-4587; www.thegracemuseum.org. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays.

■ Abilene also has a zoo, which may not have

the gleam of big-city zoos but does include all the necessary critters: 800 of them. The centerpiece is a pair of giraffes you can meet and feed from a walkway over their pen.

Abilene Zoo, 2020 Zoo Lane in Nelson Park; 325-673-9453; www.abilenetx.com/zoo. Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, until 9 p.m. Thursday.

For more information on Abilene

Contact: Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1101 N. First; 1-800-727-7704; www.abilene.com/visitors. Stop in at the visitors' center and buy the Abilene Roundup Pass for access to all these attractions and more at reduced cost. Children's passes are \$7, adult passes are \$15.