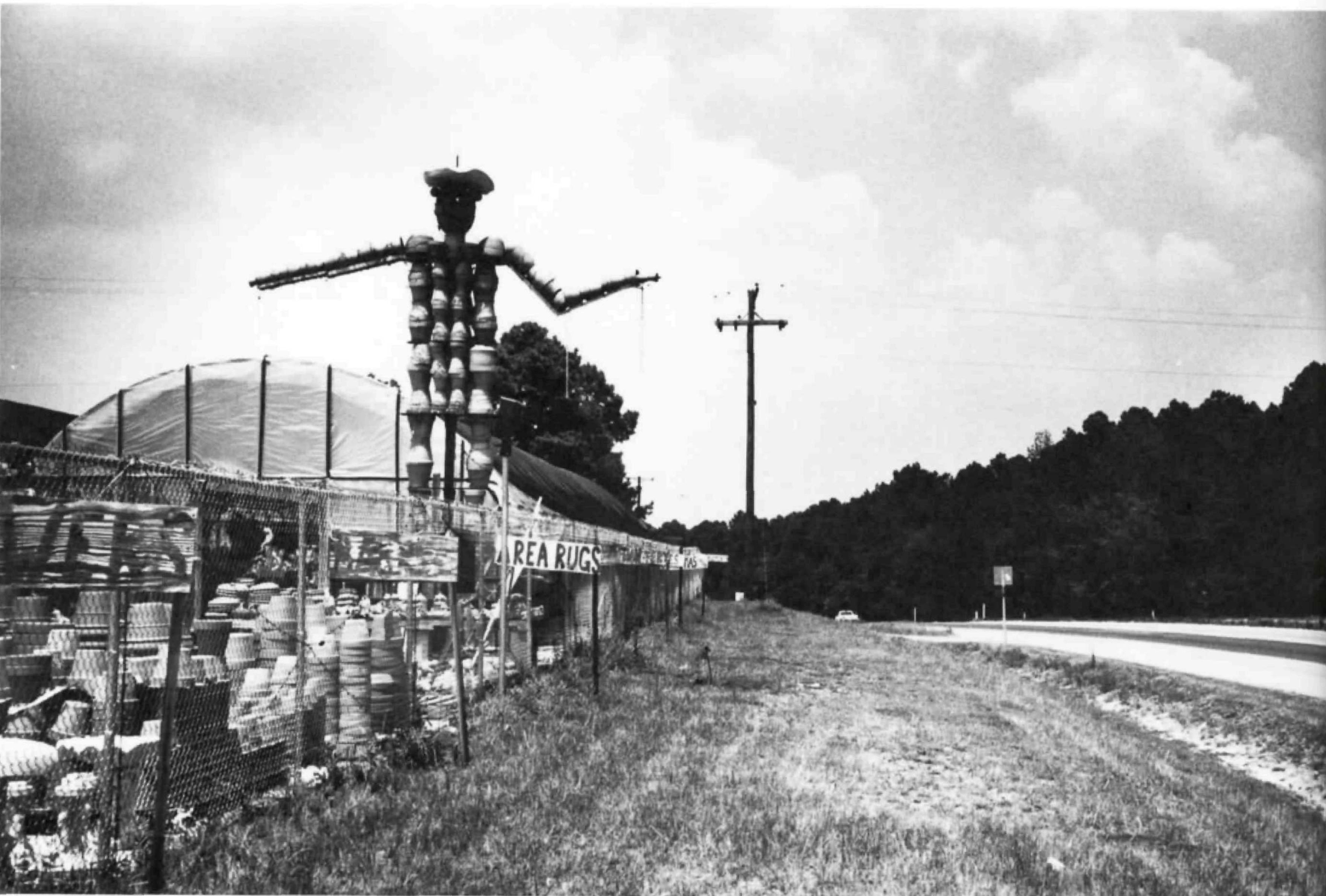

Pottery man, Highway 59 near Marshall. Photo by Nonya Grenader, 1997

"What remains is a road that travels through places
rather than simply between them,
disclosing and hiding history like a peep show."

Citgo Station, Highway 59 near Carthage. Photo by Bruce C. Webb, 1997

ROAD TRIP

BLUE STAR HIGHWAY 59*

Bruce C. Webb

**During World War II, families of those on active duty in the armed forces displayed a blue star on their front doors. When a highway collected a certain number of starred houses it was designated a Blue Star Highway.*

Like many immigrants coming to Texas in the 1970s from the rust-bucket cities of the Northeast in search of better prospects amid the bountiful newness of Houston, I entered the Lone Star State by way of Texarkana on an oppressively hot August afternoon, leaving the predictable precincts of Interstate 30 to search for U.S. 59 — the last leg of my trip to the Bayou City. Texarkana in the 1970s was a confusing little metroplex for long-distance travelers seeking Houston, mystification compounded by the fact that Texarkana is really two towns in two different states — a situation forever encrypted in its name, which according to legend was assembled by combining three letters from the names of three adjoining states, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana (TEX-ARK-ANA). After two days of steady 70-mile-per-hour progress on a series of interstates, navigating the city streets linking I-30 with the inauspicious headwaters of Highway 59 was a challenge. Today that transition has been greatly simplified by the extension of a freeway spur that intersects I-30, keeping through traffic from having any real, direct contact with the city. But the 294-mile run from Texarkana to Houston remains the main route of the hillbilly diaspora from East Texas to Houston that occurred during the Depression and World War II, an imperfect link in the chain of federal highways that have reshaped the way Americans travel.

Before the interstate system, a road map was an essential companion for planning a road trip. Gasoline companies gave plenty of them away to lure Americans out onto the highways and byways. More than simply a navigating device, a map populates distance with adventure and anticipation. Maps also serve as remarkable historical documents, showing in abstract, graphic form the inexorable evolution of the nation's connective tissue. In contrast to the road maps of a few generations ago with their bewildering, ad hoc networks of egalitarian capillary highways, a modern map is distinctly hierarchical and portrays the entire country in abbreviated form. Bold blue ribbons of interstate highway bridge the murky and more slowly evolving spaces in between, linking together a nation of anonymous interchanges.

It is difficult to say how the politics of road building left Houston so poorly connected to the Northeast. The road map depicts Highway 59 as a wandering sequence of several different road configurations generally following a steep northeasterly trajectory that threads its way through dozens of small and medium-sized towns like a child's connect-the-dots puzzle. Portions of the road remain two-lane, while newer sections bypass cities such as Livingston and Lufkin with a limited-access modern freeway. For the most part, the highway is shaped in four-lane sections in narrow rights-of-way created by slicing off front yards of homesites, businesses, and farmsteads (usually on the west side) and grafting two new lanes onto the old two-lane road. The result puts the highway uncomfortably close to the buildings fronting it and makes the driver feel like an intruder into the sanctum of adjacent domestic life. Kids frolic in thin front yards, while traffic zips by at posted speed limits of 70 miles per hour. Even new houses follow the awkward building line. On-grade crossings and driveway entrances to adjacent properties are frequent, creating the need for constant vigilance.

Wooded landscape is characteristic along most of the run through East Texas, which passes close by several national forests and lakes. Huge stands of pines shape the right of way, opening up here and there like a theater curtain to views of trailer parks, model homes, small factories, and an occasional picturesque vista.

Just south of Splendora the highway begins its final assault on Houston. Fleshing out to near-interstate design standards and colonized by giant car dealerships, it enters the city to become an important part of the metropolitan circumferential and radial freeway system. Rush-hour drivers are treated to billboards inviting homebuyers to move out to Kingwood.

Highway 59 lacks the ambition of I-10 (Jacksonville to Los Angeles) or the romance of I-45 (Galveston to Dallas), the two other long-distance freeways that converge on Houston. It enters the central city on the east side, sliding along the backside of the George R. Brown Convention Center as the Eastex Freeway, and leaves as the Southwest Freeway bound for Sharpstown, Sugar Land, and points beyond. Its progress is marked by places full of history whose names memorialize their earliest settlers. Unlike the interstate highways, which are self-referentially structured like a sonnet sequence (so many mileage markers to an interchange; so many interchanges to the next city), distances along 59 are apt to be existentially defined (the Dairy Queen sign announces, "BE THERE IN TWO SHAKES"). Signage, as befits its proximity to the road, is generally small and often hand painted, and whatever is advertised is usually delivered close at hand.

Although there are plenty of examples of the selfsame chain motels, eateries, and filling stations that congregate around interstate interchanges, much of the road architecture along Highway 59 is a product of hometown builders improvising modest interpretations of familiar formulas. A common version of the gas-station-cum-convenience-store is a log cabin or vernacular houselike building mated to a stand of gasoline pumps, a rough and artless configuration somewhere between a general store of a previous generation and the patterns of a modern convenience store. Each is one of a kind and, with residential-scale windows rather than walls of plate glass, they hide their interiors, engendering a sense of discovery as well as anxiety about conditions within. There are always a few locals hanging around inside, some of them conjuring up memories of scenes from the movie *Deliverance*. With little in common to bridge the gap between travelers and locals, conversation is restrained and usually limited to func-

untry Cottage, Highway 59 near Marshall. Photo by Bruce C. Webb, 1997

onal exchanges. Along with the partially lled racks of familiar candy bars and ınk food and a varnished plywood snack ar, there are usually some unique local nds: Saran-wrapped homemade candies, imme caps, souvenirs, and trinkets, all of which seem to have had too long a helf life.

Junk shops and antique stores appear hat look like Kienholz installations, cobled together from old buildings and garished with vast collections of hand-meowns that seem to have overflowed the nterior, spilling out helter-skelter onto he parking lot. A cluster of quilt shops, vith samples on clotheslines flapping in he compression breezes produced by assing cars and 18-wheelers, are almost vithin touching distance of the road. And urveyors of the homegrown and the omemade — boiled peanuts, watermelns, pecans, and the mysterious mayhaw elly — conduct business out of the back f pickup trucks parked along the berm r from ramshackle sheds. In places vhere the concessions group together, he effect is like traveling at highway peeds through a continuous, less-thanrand bazaar.

Sometimes these roadside concoctions re remarkably ambitious. The Dinosaur ark, operated by Don and Yvonne Bean ust outside the little town of Moscow, vas the fulfillment of Don Bean's dream f creating a park similar to one he saw nany years ago in Oregon. Investing their fe savings from careers in carpentry and eal estate, the Beans made a deal with culptor Bert Holster, who creates fiberglass figures for commercial purposes, to produce large models of dinosaurs based on drawings the couple made from encyclopedia research. The garden opened some 18 years ago, about the time the animated dinosaurs were drawing big crowds to science museums around the country. The Beans' Dinosaur Park exudes unscientific quaintness; the folksy dinosaur figures are slipped into a vernal setting, more like a back yard than a theme park, of natural landscaping, where they reside in a perpetual tableau vivant. Hidden speakers fill the air with recorded animal roars and growls, and little hand-painted signs spring up along the path bearing not just specimen labels but folk tales and religious messages as well. It's a true work of folk art, naively ambitious and charmed, although the Beans, who see their park as a commercial enterprise, would probably have it otherwise.

The modern American highway has drastically altered the ritual of dining, turning it into a food form mass-marketed to people on the run. The menus, centering around burgers, fries, and anything that can be turned into morsels of deep-fried crunch, have become an international phenomenon, with the same fast food found under the Golden Arches close to home and in Moscow's Pushkin Square. The result is that a day's travel to any distant destination always brings you into familiar territory when it's time to eat. Kids in particular begin to salivate at the sight of advertising stimuli planted in their heads by television ads, and their parents know that inside they will encounter a familiar, hassle-free eating experience. The restaurant-chain industry has broadened its target to include items for the health conscious, as well as post-modernized versions of international dishes. It also created the restaurant-as-horn-of-plenty by mating incidental steak entrées with vast, all-you-can-eat buffet bars patronized by diners who understand that gluttony must be one of the unwritten provisions of the Bill of Rights.

Highway 59 has all of these modern variations in abundance, and the traveler looking for something different has to get off the main road around the town in hopes of discovering restaurants of the *genius loci.* But it can be disconcerting to find that there are few rubes left in the restaurant business; most of them have taken a lesson or two from their more modern competitors, who are marketing not just food but the idea of food. At a motel in Lufkin we learned about a local place called Buck's Mesquite Grill from the woman working the desk, who promised a unique dining experience — wild game served up in an appropriate atmospheric setting. We set out to find Buck's, which turned out to be a road-house-looking place, newly built, tucked into the folds along the bypass road. Buck's was an amateur version of a theme restaurant, a kind of second or third-generation simulation, and the kind of place that creates its own legend de novo. The theme here was hunting lodge — a stage-set interior constructed of rough-sawn lumber and decorated with taxidermy, the atmosphere thickened with the swe smell of burning mesquite. "Buck's Tal printed in the menu, tells the story of h "Buck sets out into the crowded pines with the bare necessities of gear: his .30 Winchester and a box of cartridges, his Buck journal filled with scribbled locations of recent rubs and scrapes, and his devoted hound, Ol' Jet." That evening, back at the lodge, Buck recounts his hu to the sportsmen. And knowing that hunters cultivate intense appetites, Buck offers only the finest provisions for his friends — steaks, venison, chicken, and seafood, all grilled over hot mesquite. Outfitters supply the hunters with buck of homemade jalapeño cheese corn muffins and all-you-can-eat salad. "Finally, as the evening concludes, the hunters settle up with Buck. A no-nonsense man, he only accepts even bucks because he knows sportsmen don't wan the jingle of change in their pockets to startle their prey. To keep things simple, tax is included in each meal. No chang no worries."

Our waiter, who introduced us to Buck's menu by writing entrées on the paper tablecloth with crayons, told us that they had some antelope left, but th venison was all gone until a new shipme arrived from Denver. So much for the i sion of local game. He also inquired if we had been sent over from the mote and unabashedly told us that they get a lot of referrals from his girlfriend at the desk there, paying her two dollars a hea So much for the sense of discovery. Thi the land of big eating — king-size steak

Dinosaur Gardens, Highway 59 near Moscow. Photo by Bruce C. Webb, 1997

Junktique, Highway 59 near Carthage. Photo by Bruce C. Webb, 1997

all-you-can-eat fried catfish, biscuits, grits — and a feature of every Buck's meal was the biggest baked potatoes I have ever seen, which we were invited to garnish with 11 food substances laid out at the Buckboard bar. Salad and biscuits came in paper tubs tucked inside galvanized buckets, a sanitized version of the the way the outfitters in Buck's Tale served them. Like a familiar symphony played by the local town band, Buck's was learning how to turn local culture into hyperreality.

Like the interstate system, which has forever forsaken the old roads through town and their dilapidated, family-run motels and restaurants, Highway 59 is now shaped by a series of bypasses that divert traffic around attractive little downtowns. Or at least they were attractive before the bypasses became the new Main Streets: messy fringe-strip districts where Wal-Mart rules over an endless jumble of chaotic parking lots, fast-food emporiums and other drive-up establishments, new chain motels, and an occasional home-grown imitator. In county seats such as Marshall, a handsome courthouse still sits stoically in the well-formed town square, its buildings now largely abandoned (including the impressive, 12-story Marshall Hotel). The only extant occupants are law offices, antique stores, and an occasional family-owned restaurant. It is difficult to imagine that anyone could have consciously planned the mass exodus from these socially commodious town squares for the free parking out in the non-place realm on the perimeter.

Other towns harbor rich troves of fine historic architecture, some of it in well-preserved residential districts. Nacogdoches, which bills itself as "the oldest town in Texas," has several visitable sites attesting to its complex and colorful history: a Caddo Indian mound; a replica of the old stone fort built by the Spanish in 1779; the remaining stone structure of Old Nacogdoches University, chartered in 1845; and many fine old houses. Farther north and west of Highway 59 is the city of Jefferson, formerly an inland port where, for a brief period in the late 19th century, steamboats arrived from the Mississippi by way of a route that linked Big Cypress Bayou to Caddo Lake and the Red River. The Army Corps of Engineers dismantled the arrangement by dynamiting a jam of debris in the Red River in 1874, making the channel impassable for steamboats. Jefferson has capitalized on its historic resources, refashioning itself as a living museum by restoring much of its historic downtown, including the Excelsior Hotel, the second-oldest hotel in Texas, filling the empty shops with antique stores, and carefully refurbishing many large old homes, most of which have been converted into bed and breakfasts. With its proximity to Caddo Lake State Park, Jefferson's aggressive promoters see a bright future for the town as a tourist mecca, luring nostalgia buffs, sportsmen, and ecotourists.

In a series of little towns that includes Garrison and Timpson, Highway 59, at four lanes, still forms one of the sides of the town squares, with big pot-bellied water towers in the background serving to mark the town sites. Tenaha, which has its own stoplight as well as a rare case of civic boosterism, advertises itself as "A Little Town With Big Potential" and still has a functioning "Whistle Stop" restaurant across the street from the small, amazingly adept neoclassical town hall. In a bleak declaration of egocentrism, a sign on a blank brick wall graphically proclaims Tenaha to be the center of a cosmos consisting of the surrounding towns of Timpson, Carthage, Joaquin, and Center. Tenaha is also the location of Loop 168, Texas's shortest state highway (395 feet), a fact commemorated on a plaque honoring E. H. Wall, "one of our pioneer civic leaders who was instrumental in obtaining Texas Loop 168 so the square of Tenaha could be paved."

The progression along Highway 59, with its time-killing inconsistencies, can be annoying to the traveler hell-bent on simply getting there. But what makes it a road still worth coping with are precisely the cracks and breaks that keep it so incomplete. They become the portals through which one peers into a life that is vanishing. You can sense the new squeezing out the old, but there has never been enough prosperity or enough trade to finish the job. What remains is a road that travels through places rather than simply between them, disclosing and hiding history like a peep show. Inevitably the new will eat the old. Already there is serious talk about a new highway, Interstate 69, that would roughly follow the present 59 alignment to link the Tex-Mex border with Chicago, supporting the commercial potentials of the North American Free Trade Agreement. When this occurs, another layer of history and another place of discovery will be bypassed, burying the sense of place under new signs of progress. The Beans' Dinosaur Park and dozens of careworn little businesses and struggling motels along the old road show that progress is always gained at the expense of someone else's dreams. And in these easy few steps we estrange ourselves from sources of knowing who we are and where we came from. It is perhaps inevitable, but nevertheless a little sad to see. ■