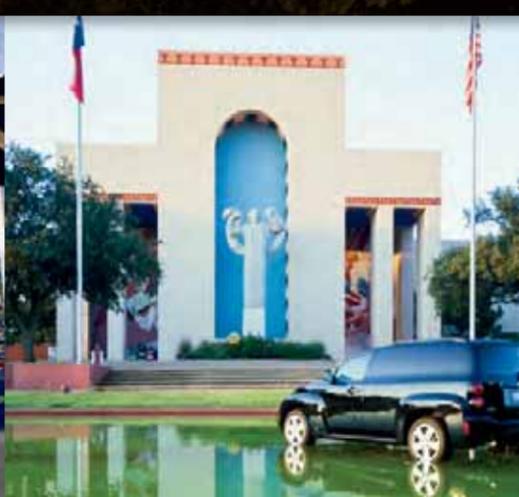
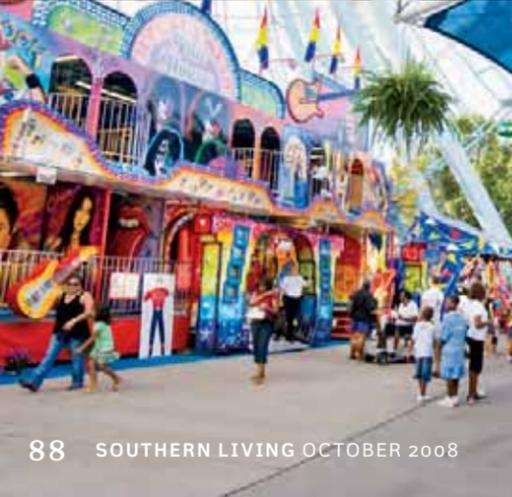
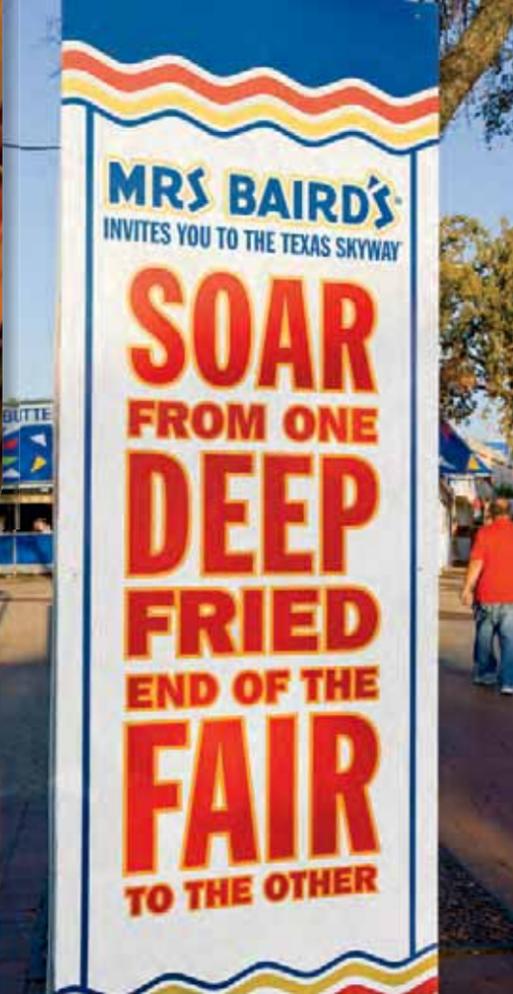




HAVE FUN AT THE FAIR

Step right up! Texas puts on one of the biggest in the country— with oodles of rides, cool cars, fab food, and a top-notch football game. You gotta see it to believe it.
By **Jennifer Mckenzie Frazier**, photography **Art Meripol**





IT'S THE PERFECT SHOW OF EVERYTHING WONDERFUL about the state: the hospitality, high energy, and fun. Come with us as we two-step through the fairgrounds with some of our favorite faces, sights, and sounds behind the magic.

You'll find beauty queens with shiny pink lips and apple-cheeked boys in starched blue jeans showing their prizewinning livestock. Take a ride through the clouds on the Texas Star, a 212-foot Ferris wheel. Spy ladies dressed to the nines with Louis Vuittons and 6-inch heels walking beside people covered in tattoos. Smell caramelized sugar, and feel sticky cotton candy on the tip of each finger.

You don't have to be a Texan to enjoy the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. The welcome mat's big (like everything here), and so is the fair (one of the largest in the U.S. and open since 1886).

The Real Big Tex It only makes sense to start your journey with a visit to Big Tex, the ambassador for the State Fair of Texas.

First you see him—52 feet tall and strong—like Jack's beanstalk rising into the sky. He wears real blue jeans, a cowboy hat, and an inviting grin.

Then you hear his voice—deep and mechanical yet comforting. "Howdy, folks! Welcome to the great State Fair of Texas!" Tex is an icon and a landmark—the place to meet people, the spot to go if you get lost, the number one picture-taking background, and a good location to sit and take it all in.

Behind that voice (and it was a true shock to this Texan), there is a real, live man. Meet Bill Bragg, voice of Big Tex. Bill talks from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. for 24 days straight. And he adores every single minute of it.

"My biggest compliment is when people tell me they always thought the voice was recorded," he says with a huge grin. "This is year seven for me. My first year was when Big

Tex turned 50. I'm going to do this until I'm 100 years old."

When you lay eyes on Bill, you know he was meant for this job. He stands 6'5" with a whopping cowboy hat, boots, jeans, and a Western belt buckle the size of a cantaloupe. On his rare breaks he's usually with fans posing for pictures or signing autographs.

"Ever since I became the voice of Big Tex, I started dressing like him," Bill confesses. "I think I have the most important job here. Not everybody eats a corn dog when they come to the fair, but everyone sees Big Tex."

Tasty Traditions To purchase anything, you need special coupons (50 cents each), otherwise known as fairground currency. Use them for food, drinks, and rides.

Some people observe the "ride before eating" rule. You'll quickly figure out what you can stomach.

Before or after, don't skip the Fletcher's corny dog. It's a classic. After that your options are as endless as the Lone Star State.

For instance, take the cotton candy. Faye Robertson has been making and selling cotton candy at the same booth for 31 years. "We probably sell 2,000 bags a day," says Faye. "I could make a cone of cotton candy as big as you are."

Robin Hotchkiss makes candied and caramel Gala apples out of the same copper kettles her grandmother used at the fair in 1938. "My grandmother was 'Apple Mary,' my mom was 'Apple Annie,' but you can call me whatever you want," she says. "We go through 600 to 700 cases of apples in the 24 days of the fair, and there's 138 in each case. Do the math," she says with a laugh. We did—it's more than 88,000 apples encased in Robin's candy coating.

Texas-big numbers apply for

STRANGE SIGHT

Bryan Berg, Harvard grad in architecture/design and 2007 fair exhibitor, has won the Guinness Record for the World's Tallest House of Freestanding Playing Cards more than eight times.



BIG TEX FACTS

Heights: 52 feet tall **Chest:** 31 feet
Boot size: 70 **Hat size:** 75 gallon
Pant inseam: 16 feet **Hands:** 3 feet long
Head: 8 feet from chin to top
Waist: 23½ feet **Original cost:** \$750

Caroline and Jim McKee as well. They sell 12,000 ice-cream bars and 40,000 sausages-on-a-stick each year. During the annual food competitions, Abel Gonzales keeps winning awards. In 2006, it was fried Coke and last year, fried cookie dough. This year? Who knows?

And let's not forget to mention that there's Pedro's tamales, funnel cakes, Pink Things (ice treats the color of that famous stomach remedy), nachos, beef Wellington, fried mac-and-cheese, fried green tomatoes—and so much more to tempt you.

Pampered Pigs and Beauty Queens Just breathe deeply, and you can find the barns. To a Texan it smells of money. Watch when the highest bidder gets the pig. You might also get to meet a beauty queen.

"I just won my crown in May of 2007, but I show pigs," says Kari Beth Langbein, Miss Teen Texas International 2007.

What's more important—crown or pigs? This 18-year-old stunner, dressed in rhinestone earrings, faded blue jeans, and a satin pageant sash says, "My crown is really important to me. This is my ninth title, but I love pigs. I'd pick pigs over anything."

Step Right Up These three magic words taunt you. They challenge you to come up and win a prize—all the while making it sound easy. For some it is. For others, a tiny stuffed duck might cost 50 bucks if your tossing arm doesn't cooperate. Still, the Midway is all bright lights and laughter; this is where the action happens.

Insider Parking Advice

Weekends are usually busy at the fair, and football weekend is a pure madhouse. Parking can be a challenge even on a slower day simply because there are not enough spots for the visitors. We advise taking public transportation and DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) State Fair Shuttle. Visit www.dart.org/statefair. The nearest DART station with free parking is the Mockingbird station.

If you do choose to park near the fair, try to find an attended lot and pay a little more, or try to park inside the fairgrounds if the lots are not full.

"We've had babies born here on the Midway—anyone born on the Midway gets a lifetime pass," says Errol McKoy, president of the State Fair of Texas. "People have gotten married on the Texas Star. No telling how many people have met their significant others out here."

For a fistful of coupons, you can enjoy a 15-minute ride on the Texas Star, the 20-story Texas-size Ferris wheel. The Texas SkyWay is another must—the best way to see the fairgrounds. Go at night when you feel as if you can reach out your hand and

touch downtown Dallas and the Ferris wheel at the same time.

There's also the football game between The University of Texas at Austin and the University of Oklahoma (true rivals), tons of exhibitors inside pavilions, and let's not forget the shopping (for everything from silver jewelry and clothing to mattresses and vacuum cleaners).

Errol says he's loved every minute of his 21 years on the job. "I did a radio show recently, and someone said 'Oh, the fair. That's the three Cs: cows, corn dogs, and cowboys.' I corrected him and said, 'No, it's the four Cs. It's cows, corn dogs, cowboys, and culture,'" says Errol.

We say it's even more than three or four Cs. It's magic. And something you won't forget. ●

State Fair of Texas: September 26-October 19, 2008; www.bigtex.com or (214) 565-9931. **Admission:** \$14 adults, \$10 children under 48 inches tall and seniors, free ages 2 and under.